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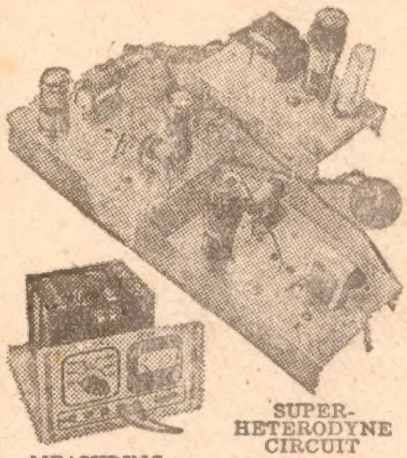

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MAY, 1946 VOL. 3, NO. 5

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HEAP-COLD MAGIC

By WILL NICHOLS

ONE of the best factors that Fort Union, the American Fur Company post on the upper Missouri in Colorado, ever had was Andrew Dawson, who officiated there in the eighteen-thirties. He was a fair dealer, of commanding personality, and treated the Indians well at all times. Consequently the redskins held him in high esteem. Their trust became so great that they attributed supernatural power to the magnetic paleface.

This supposed power was once put to an embarrassing test. One winter day a young Sioux warrior came to the post with a simple request: he wanted Dawson to turn him into a white horse.

Dawson gently tried to dissuade him, pointing out the hardships of a horse's life. The Indian was adamant. He had decided that a white horse was just what he wanted to be. It behooved Dawson to work a little magic—or lose face.

The factor told the warrior to return to the post a few days later. Promptly at the appointed time, he appeared in Dawson's office, covered with snow from a howling northwest blizzard.

Again Dawson attempted to argue the fellow into being content to remain a mere Indian. But the Sioux was as firm as ever in his determination to become a white horse.

So the factor stretched his hands toward him, mumbled a string of impressively mystic phrases, grunted and gestured in approved ceremonial style. Then he instructed the Indian to remove all his clothing. The brave did so. Placing a halter about the brave's neck, Dawson led him outside of the post's stockade, and tethered him to a bush on the wind-swept and rapidly whitening plain. He was to remain there for two hours, Dawson gravely told him, and then, lo and behold! he'd turn into a white horse.

Dawson trudged back to his warm office, settled himself with a drink before the crackling fire, and waited.

It was a short wait. In a few minutes the door burst open. On the threshold was the naked Sioux, his teeth chattering, his hide blue beneath its copper sheen. In his shivering hands he held the snowy halter. He tossed it at the factor's feet.

"No want to be white horse," he blurted. "Me stay Indian. Me want clothes."

Dawson had no further requests from Indians to be turned into white horses.

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Because of the current serious shortage of printing paper, it may become necessary to change the frequency of issue of this magazine or even temporarily to suspend its publication. We hope our readers will bear with us and will continue to make inquiries at their newsstand even if they are unable to purchase future issues of this magazine at the first attempt. We promise you that as soon as more paper becomes available, this magazine will appear every month on all newsstands. And we promise you further that no matter what the frequency of issue may be, the quality of the stories will be maintained at the highest standard.

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Killers Ride Fast

BY WILLIAM DECATUR

She swiveled the .32, but not fast enough. Blore hurled himself at her as the gun's deafening roar echoed through the room.

The mysterious stranger was supposed to be a brutal killer, and quite a few hombres were working on that theory—but they didn't know he had a special interest in frontier finance

JERRY GARTH sprang to her feet as she heard the thud of horses' hoofs, and hurried to the mirror. In tan riding pants, and with her yellow sweater, drawing in snugly to her narrow waist, her reflected image was a striking one. Her honey-hued hair lay smooth and soft on her head. It was drawn low, in a neat coil at the nape of her slender neck, to form a frame for the white perfection of her piquant face. Her eyes were clear and blue, and as she strode to the door, the lithe movement of her youthful figure caused rhythmic ripples to play along the length of her. She cried gaily:

"Visitors, dad."

"Geraldine!"

Something in her father's tone caused

Illustrated by Newton H. Alfred

her to turn in surprise. His handsome face was clouded as he rose. Striding purposefully toward a crackling fire of juniper, he lifted a Winchester from the fireplace mantel. "Perhaps I better open the door," he said bruskly, drawing back the hammer of the rifle.

The girl drew a sudden, sharp breath as she grasped the significance of his tone and action. Not since they had been driven from the Dust Bowl to buy a small ranch in the Silverplate country near the border had they had more than two or three visitors at a time. The drumming of hoofs seemed to indicate that at least a dozen riders were approaching.

The horses came to a halt outside. Her father opened the door to a crack. He thrust the Winchester through the opening, and peered out into the darkness.

Saddle leather creaked as one big man dismounted. "It's all right," said a tense voice. "Just me, Garth—Judd Blore."

Todd Garth expelled his breath in relief as he leaned the rifle against the wall. Jerry understood his anxiety. Sometimes desperadoes crossed the Rio Grande, murdering settlers for the few dollars they might have in their homes.

"Come in, Blore. Ask the rest of the boys—"

"Can't stop," Blore's tone was clipped. As he came within the crack of light, there were lines of strain around his small, hard eyes.

BLORE was the biggest cattleman in the Silverplate, and he had done numerous small favors for the Garths in the weeks since they had come to the country. But Jerry had never been able to fight

down a repugnance for the man. It was the touch of his cold, damp hand which had first raised her hackles. Then on several occasions she had caught him looking at her in a way which had caused her cheeks to go crimson. Small things upon which to base distrust, she told herself, for Blore had certainly been kind in his rough, genial way.

"Any rider breeze through here going hell-bent-for-leather?"

"Haven't seen anyone all day," Garth replied.

"Figgered Lewis might of come this way."

"You mean you're looking for Brett Lewis, who owns the next ranch?" Garth inquired in surprise.

"He did own it, until yesterday," Blore replied dryly. "I bought it from him for cash. If I'd known he was going to murder Mace Redfield, I'd of waited, and bought it for taxes after he was lynched."

"Seemed like a nice fellow, Blore. You sure he killed Redfield?"

Blore snorted. "Me'n 'Coin' Starkey seen him do it. We was passearin' over to pay him a visit. Never saw nothing more cold-blooded. He was talkin' to Redfield, and the old man rode away. He shot him in the back."

Two other riders had dismounted. As they came within range of the light from the ranch-house, Jerry recognized "Rawhide" Tanner, the sheriff, a gaunt man with a drooping mustache and skin the color of saddle leather. Beside him was Coin Starkey, owner of the trading post in San Pasqual, and a number of other trading posts throughout the southwest. He was a sallow, scarecrow of a man with clothes that bagged loosely around him.

"He 'pears to have gone plumb off the reservation," Starkey piped. "So much money all at once must of gone to his haid."

"He's not at his ranch?" Garth asked.

"That's where we took him prisoner," said the sheriff, in a dry, rustling voice. "Lucky we got the drop on him. He was in a mood to burn powder. His hands was bound as we rode to town, but he got loose somehow, rode his hoss against Blore's snatched one of Blore's guns, and made his getaway."

"We couldn't hit him," Blore growled. "He threw himself under his palomino, his arms around its neck and only one leg in the saddle. They wasn't nothing to shoot at."

"Just the way Injuns used to keep from makin' targets of theirselves," Starkey said shrilly.

"Better get moving," Sheriff Tanner said dryly. "Care to come along with the posse, Garth?"

"Be right with you," said Garth.

"One other matter first," Blore removed a paper from his pocket. "Your papers as notary public have arrived, haven't they, Garth? Good! Here's the deed to Lewis' ranch. Draw up the necessary legal papers so I can file them with the county clerk."

Garth opened the deed. "All properly signed." He put it on his desk, strapped on his Colts, and strode toward the door. He turned suddenly, his eyes shadowed.

"Keep the door bolted, Geraldine!"

CHAPTER II

A Murderer's Story

A DREAD feeling of loneness and foreboding stole over Jerry as she clicked the bolt into place, and heard the drumming hoofs dying away. The nearest woman was twenty miles away, in San Pasqual. All about their sprawling ranchhouse, which her father had bought with what money he had been able to salvage after the dust storms had driven them out, lay miles of rolling prairie and alkali sinks. At night she could hear the yap of coyotes, the occasional bawling of a stricken calf, the snort of horses in the corral. A strange, wild country which she loved, but in which she still felt a little like a foreigner.

She threw several chunks of twisted juniper on the fire, and dropped into a chair facing its cheery crackling, hoping that its warmth would dispel the chill icicles of anxiety in her bosom.

It must have been half an hour later that she heard the silence shattered by the flat, dry crack of a rifle. She jumped to her feet, her breath quickening. Scattering pistol shots!

Silence again—a silence pregnant with the threat of menace. The girl dashed to

the window, raising a chintz curtain. Beyond the sycamores clustered around the house, the bowl-like valley in which the house lay was a well of shadows. The star-sprinkled sky did not penetrate the ebony shadows. Far off a coyote uttered a long, nerve-shaking series of yaps.

Jerry dropped the curtain, ice crackling in her blood. Again the strangeness of the country and its happenings depressed her. Her father had spoken of meeting Brett Lewis. He had called to pay his respects one day while she was in San Pasqual on a shopping trip in the buckboard. He was young, alert, with curly black hair and laughing brown eyes, her father had said.

Now Brett Lewis was a fugitive from justice—a murderer!

The steady hammer of shod hoofs reached into Jerry's consciousness. She had been

He pinned her arms to her side and her Winchester clattered to the floor.

hearing that approaching horse for minutes without being aware of what caused the sound. It came to Jerry in a sickening flash that something had happened to her father. Her dire forebodings realized! Someone was coming back to bring her the bad news!

Jerry uttered a choked sound, picked up the Winchester, and unbolted the door, her father's admonitions forgotten. Her lovely mother had died of dust pneumonia less than a year before, and now the thought uppermost in the girl's mind was that her father needed her and she must go to him. With a calmness that characterized her in emergencies, Jerry laid her plans as she dashed across the yard toward the harness shack. She'd saddle Chunky, and . . .

But her planning went chaotic in her mind as a riderless horse was momentarily silhouetted against the brow of the hill. *Riderless!* What did it mean? Only a horse with a determined rider or a very frightened animal ran that fast! Stunned, Jerry froze in hersteps, her heart pounding. Then the horse was swallowed up in the shadows, and she could hear it thundering down the slope.

NO time to puzzle out the answer! Jerry broke into a run. She found her saddle and bridle in the darkness, dashed out of the harness shack, and toward the corral.

She hung saddle and blanket on the corral fence, climbed over, and called urgently, "Chunky!" A strawberry roan separated from the horses which had retreated to the opposite side of the corral, and came toward her for the expected lump of sugar, whickering. She stroked his quivering, silken nose for a moment, and then slipped the bridle over his head.

A creamy tan horse w e n t crashing through the sycamores, crunching dry leaves underfoot. Jerry glanced toward it as it flashed past, but could see no one in the saddle. It was lost in the shadows, and she could hear it come to a stop beyond the house.

Jerry led Chunky toward the saddle. Suddenly she stopped short, the breath crowding into her throat. The riderless horse was creamy-tan—a beautiful palomino! Blore had said that Brett Lewis had escaped on a palomino!

One of the posse's shots must have struck the fugitive from his saddle. Horses are notoriously afraid of blood. If she rode in the direction the horse had come from, Brett Lewis might mistake her for one of the possemen, and shoot her. She glanced quickly toward the brow of the hill, half expecting to see a desperate man outlined against the skyline. But there was no man there, though she had a feeling that unseen presences peopled the darkness about her.

Jerry removed Chunky's bridle, carried the riding equipment back to the harness shack, and found herself almost flying across the cleared space, the rifle gripped in a cold hand. Reaching the porch, however, she fought down the rising tide of panic. Absurd! She, Jerry Garth, who had kept up her courage through long days and nights while her mother needed her, was now behaving like a frightened child. The girl's white lips twitched briefly as she forced herself to smile.

She stepped inside the house. Her smile vanished swiftly, and she felt small fingers of terror crawling down her spine. A man who had been slipping a paper into the pocket of his blue work shirt straightened with a jerk over her father's desk.

JERRY and the stranger stared at each other. The man said nothing, and Jerry could not have uttered a sound if her life had depended on it. She was rooted to the floor, as helpless as if she were frozen in a block of ice. Instinctively her hand went to her bosom in a vain effort to still its turbulent heaving.

It seemed to Jerry as if the only part of her which was not frozen was her mind.

The man was not extraordinarily tall, but his rough-hewn body gave such an impression of largeness that for the first time in her life Jerry felt dwarfed and small. His hair was a mass of unruly black curls, and he wore no hat. His rugged, strongly-cast face was deeply tanned up to the white line of shading marked by the protecting brim of a ten-gallon Stetson.

"You're Brett Lewis," the girl said hoarsely. "And you were on that tan horse, riding like an Indian where I couldn't see you."

His wide mouth quirked with a mirthless smile. "And you're Jerry Garth."

She gripped his lean brown hand and cried apprehensively: "You couldn't shoot a man in the back!"

She brought up the Winchester swiftly as he started toward her. The pulse in her throat throbbed. In the room with a murderer! At the same moment, a contradictory impulse struggled with the idea. Even in blue Levis and work shirt, there was a magnetic attraction about the man that drew Jerry to him, despite her fear. He did not look like a man who could shoot anyone in the back!

"Be careful!" caution warned her. His disarming attraction might prove his most dangerous weapon. And Blore and Starkey had seen him kill a man.

Brett Lewis stopped dead in his tracks as she cocked the gun, and threw it up to her shoulder. Her finger was ice against the trigger.

"I believe you would shoot me," he marveled.

"You know I would. Walk backward to the desk—slowly! And return that deed where you found it."

An odd smile crossed his lips. "All right, miss," he said, and his eyes never left hers, held them almost in a hypnotic clutch, "I'll return it to you instead. Here!"

It was an old trick and Jerry should have known better, but instinctively she lowered the gun, let go with one hand to catch the paper that sailed toward her.

Then he was upon her, pinning her arms to her sides as the Winchester clattered harmlessly to the floor. His face was inches away from her now and he still smiled at her as his lips almost touched hers. She fought furiously against him, got one hand free and clawed at his face, but his grip did not relax. It tightened until she could feel her breath hammering to escape the stricture of her lungs. He kissed her then. And with that kiss his grip on her seemed to loosen, and her breath poured out between her lips like escaping steam. Yet she was just as helpless to get away, while her heart beat like mad, as though some hidden spring of emotion had been tapped. She relaxed for a moment and her lips lingered on his, but then realization again came over her, and again she fought him.

She broke away finally, made a dive for the Winchester on the floor beside her. As she rose erect with the gun in her hand, she noticed that he had picked up the deed, was replacing it in his pocket. A smile played across his countenance, and his eyes had lost that fearful, hunted look.

"I'm going to kill you for what you just did, Brett Lewis," she said. "Get back! Now, put that deed back where you got it, and no tricks, this time!"

Carelessly, he stepped backward, reached toward the paper, then wrath kindled in his brown eyes. "I'll be damned if I will!" he exploded.

"Return that deed you stole!" she said icily.

"Shoot if you want—you won't get that deed any other way. My name has been forged to it."

"Didn't you sell your property to Judd Blore?"

"I sure didn't ma'am! The C-Bar-M has been in my family for three generations, and I'm not selling to anyone."

"Didn't you shoot Mace Redfield?"

COALS of anger burned in his eyes. "The first time I ever saw Mace Redfield was when I found him dead. What quarrel could I have with a man I never saw before?"

"Do you mean to tell me," she asked sharply, "that you've lived here all your life and never met Redfield?"

"Redfield," he pointed out, "doesn't live in San Pasqual, and none of his trading posts are very near here."

"What brought him to your ranch?"

He spread his lean, brown hands. "I don't know, ma'am."

"The sheriff wouldn't be taking you into custody without a reason," she said grimly, trying to bolster her crumbling belief in his guilt. There was something boyishly wistful about his face that was pounding down her defenses, weakening her will.

He laughed bitterly. "Reckon those two perjurin' buzzards have convinced Sheriff Tanner."

Abruptly Jerry heard hoof beats. All at once she was shaken as she had never been shaken in her life; besieged by doubts. She longed to say, "Run—you can have your freedom." It was only by fiercely steeling herself to realize that if she freed him that he might kill again—perhaps her father.

His face had lost its wistful look; gone hard. His brown ees had taken on a wild, hunted glint. He glanced down. Her heart faltered as she followed the direction of his glance. The gun he'd taken from Blore!

"I'll shoot if you move!" she warned him. "If you're really innocent—"

"I'm innocent, Miss Jerry," he said harshly. "And that's the reason I'm not going to hang for a murder I didn't commit. It's also the reason why I didn't go for my hardware with you, but with those coyotes out there—well, I'll let the first one that comes through that door have it. If you intend to shoot, you might better do it now, because nothing's going to stop me from going for my gun except a bullet."

An electric tension seemed to crackle in

She drove the muzzle of the pistol sharply into his back.

the air. Objects seemed to stand out with unnatural clarity as their eyes warred.

Jerry said huskily, "It—it might be my father."

"I'm powerful sorry, Miss Jerry, but what I said goes. And I'm also sorry about —well, about before. I know I shouldn't have done it, but I couldn't help myself."

Her thoughts were in wild confusion. She knew she should pull that trigger. That it might mean her father's life if she didn't. But the desperation in his face caused sympathy to swell—a tight lump in her throat. She couldn't seem to work up the anger, the hatred that should have been in her heart.

But the thought of snuffing out the life spark that fed his vigorous young body, paralyzed her. The clatter of hoofs was close now. She must shoot—she must!

Suddenly she dropped the rifle limply. The room swung before her pain-filled eyes like a pendulum as she staggered to the door, sick and weak at the ghastly

thing she had almost done. She closed the door, then bolted it. Leaning against it, she closed her eyes.

She heard him crossing the room. His arm gripped her shoulder, and he helped her to a chair. Despite his strength, he was gentle as a woman. She should have shrunk from his touch—the touch of a murderer. Instead, a tingling current ran through her body.

SHE stiffened, jerking away from him as she heard men dismounting outside. She opened startled eyes. His face had gone hard. He backed aawy from her, his hand on the butt of his .45.

"I—I should have shot you," she said in a throaty voice.

He nodded his curly black head.

Footsteps stamped on the porch. The latch rattled on the door. "Open up, Miss Jerry. This is Judd Blore and Coin Starkey."

The girl's breath was coming in stabbing gasps. She tried to keep her voice steady as she said: "Dad told me to keep the door bolted."

"I want to talk to you."

"I can hear you."

There was a disgruntled snort. "Have you seen anything of Lewis?"

She turned to see his hand tense on his gun. She shook her honey-hued head, a pleading light in her eyes.

"How could I?" she countered.

"His hoss is behind your house."

"I heard sounds back there," she admitted.

His tone was displeased: "Me and Coin will look around."

She could hear the crackle of dry leaves as they circled the house. She waited in an agony of suspense, hoping they would leave. If they searched until her father returned home, she would then have no excuse for not opening the door. Presently Blore returned to the door.

"No sign of Lewis," he said. "Reckon one of our shots must of hit him."

"Thank you for looking anyway, Mr. Blore."

She heard the clatter of their horses, riding away. Brett Lewis strode to the window, raising a chintz curtain. His hand dropped to the butt of his gun as he started out.

"I ought to shoot that polecat Blore!" he snapped.

She flew to his side, her hand shaking as she gripped his lean, brown hand. "You couldn't shoot a man in the back!" she cried apprehensively.

"No," he said grimly, "but that's what he tried to do to me. After the sheriff came and got the drop on me, and Blore and Starkey swore to a lie that I killed Redfield, Blore rode beside me as we headed toward San Pasqual. He whispered something about being on my side and knowing I was innocent. And then he cut my bonds to free my hands."

"Why should he do that?" the girl asked incredulously.

His lips quirked in a brief smile. "So I'd try to make my escape and he could shoot me. But I outsmarted the buzzard. I ran my hoss against his, making him grab leather. While he was doing it, I grabbed one of his guns. Then I threw myself out of range by hanging to my palomino's neck the way an Indian boy taught me to do when I was a kid. That palomino can outrun any hoss in the Silverplate.

"Blore was over to my place yesterday trying to buy my spread dirt cheap. After he was gone, I found my desk had been gone through. Shorty Winslow, my foreman, claims he saw Blore leanin' over the desk when he come in unexpected. I had to go out for a few minutes to talk to one of the boys. After Blore had made this play to kill me, I wondered if he had stole that deed to my ranch."

"But a forged deed wouldn't do him any good," the girl protested.

"If Blore had succeeded in killing me while I was trying to escape from the posse," he asked grimly, "who'd know it was forged?"

"I can't believe you," Jerry cried. "Blore has more land than any cattleman in the Silverplate. Why should he want yours?"

"That," he said bleakly, "is what I aim to figger out."

"How did you know Blore had brought the deed here?"

"I was playing a hunch. If he *had* stole it, he'd have to have new papers drawn. And your paw's a notary public. Now I'll keep the deed."

Her face clouded. "I should have shot you!"

"Why didn't you?" he asked softly. "Would you have acted as you did if—if I was just any hombre?"

"No, I—" She raised stricken eyes. "How do I know?" Her eyes were blind with tears at something eager and boyish which had suddenly lighted his face. "Go now—please!" she begged him tremulously.

BEFORE she realized his intention, he drew her into his arms and kissed her. Fire streaked through Jerry's blood as his lips pressed hers. Without her willing it, her lips parted under the ardor of his caress. She felt a dismaying emptiness inside as he released her, his eyes all awakened to her loveliness and charm. Hard eyes no longer!

Then she looked at him and there was an infinite tenderness in that look, and her arms seemed to be drawn up to grip his, to hold him for a moment before her, while she probed the blueness of his eyes, the frankness of his face. Then she drew him to her again, this time of her own volition, and her heart beat wildly, thudding madly in her breast, echoing a rising fury of love that she could not quiet. Her lips met his again with a fervor that frightened her at first, and had her eyes been open she might have seen the creases that etched themselves in a frown on his brow.

But the warm, yielding softness of her lips dispelled the wonderment on his face, and as his arms crushed her to him convulsively, only their heart beats gave sign that life existed in these two figures that clung as one. He let her go finally, held her out at arms length, as his eyes devoured the lithe beauty of her, drank in the subtle aroma that drifted in sweet waves from her hair.

Jerry watched him, her hands digging into his arms. Her trembling, red lips were half parted and her teeth dug a furrow in her lower lip. Her eyes were scared now, her will-power slowly returning.

But as he attempted to kiss her once more, Jerry fought free, her cheeks flaming. She slapped him viciously across the cheek. It was more fright at the wild torrent of emotion which had swept over her, weakening her will, than anger at him. But he could not know that.

"Go, get out, you—you murderer!" she flung at him.

She could have bit off her tongue when she had uttered the words. His rugged body stiffened. All the light went out of his face, leaving it bleak and bitter. She tried to say something—something to show him that she had not meant those harsh words. But the tight lump of agony in her throat would not allow her to utter a sound.

She stared at him with swimming eyes, shaken by the knowledge that he had stirred fires in her as no man had ever done.

Granite-faced, he whirled, unbolted the door, and stalked out. Jerry ran to the door, leaning dazedly against the frame.

"Brett," she choked out; but he had vanished into the darkness. She ran out into the yard, only to hear a low whistle, and then the disappearing thump of the palomino's hoofs.

CHAPTER III

The Petrified Forest

JERRY GARTH rode up to the bunkhouse of the C-Bar-M the following day. The boys rose at her approach. Outside of frankly appraising stares at her slim young figure, there was no particular friendliness in their attitude.

"Is one of you Shorty Winstlow?" she asked.

A short, stocky man built like a Jersey bull rose, crossing the porch. He was bowlegged, and his homely face was freckled.

"Yes, ma'am," he said politely but without warmth.

"I'd like to talk to you," the girl said, adding, "in private."

He nodded his large, squarish head, and mounted a paint horse which stood at the hitching rail. They rode across the prairie a distance toward the smoky, purple hills. The girl turned suddenly, drawing rein.

"I'm Jerry Garth," she explained. "I wanted to talk to you about—about Brett Lewis."

"I'm listening," he said bluntly.

She gestured impatiently. "Don't act

that way, please. I know how you boys must feel."

"Pardon me, ma'am. You don't know by a long sight how we feel! Brett Lewis is the sort of an hombre you'd get up and cheer yore throat plumb raw about. We busted into town last night to tear the place loose and get him out o' the hoosegow. But he'd escaped."

"I know," she faltered. "I saw him after—after he'd escaped."

Shorty gave her a startled glance, and whistled softly. "Where?"

"He was in our home when—when Blore came back. I sent him away."

"I never heered that."

"No one knows he was there, except—"

"Whose side are you on?" he asked abruptly.

She regarded him with troubled eyes. "Honestly, I don't know. I want to believe in Brett—in Mr. Lewis, but—"

"I'll tell you, ma'am,"—his tone was more friendly—"me and the boys don't want to be onfriendly, but we don't know who to trust. It looked to us like you might of come over here to spy out Brett's whereabouts."

She met his eyes frankly. "I do want to know his whereabouts!"

"Why?"

Long lashes swept over her startling blue eyes, and color crept into her fair, tanned cheeks. "I couldn't sleep last night. I kept turning over what he'd told me, and—well, I believe he was telling the truth. I don't believe he killed Redfield!"

"You can lay yore chips on that!" Shorty said emphatically. He gave her a searching glance. "Are you in love with ——?"

"No, no!"

"You said that with too much feeling, ma'am. I should of guessed. That makes things different. One of the boys discovered something on the road to San Pasqual this mornin', and we was chawin' over it when you rode up. There was a heap o' blood on the road—dried blood."

"Has someone else been killed, Shorty?"

"I don't reckon so. Leastwise, there wasn't no sign o' the body. We figger it's where Redfield was killed."

"But he was killed on the C-Bar-M."

"Pardon me, ma'am his body *was found* on our range. It was found on that part o' our range covered with petrified forest. Blore claims he and that buzzard, Starkey, was passearin' over to pay their respects when they seen Brett shoot Redfield. Now why'd they happen to be there? That would be the long way around from Blore's layout.

"When that waddy comes in with that tale o' blood on the road, I sent him in to San Pasqual to examine Redfield's clothin'. There was red dust in the road where the blood was found, and red dust all over Redfield's clothin'. But they ain't no red clay on our propitty. And they was mighty few fragments of agatized wood on his duds, such as they would be if he was killed in the petrified forest on our range."

THE girl's eyes were wide. "You mean someone killed Redfield, dragging his body to your property to frame Brett?"

"That's what me and the boys concludes."

"But Blore wouldn't do that just to forge Brett's name to a deed." She told Shorty about the paper Brett had taken. "There must be something else behind it," she continued. "Water rights, perhaps."

"No, ma'am. The springs on the C-Bar-M ain't got none too much water, and Blore's already got the whole Rio Grande to water his critters in, if they was that thirsty."

The girl was thoughtful for several minutes. "It must be something to do with the petrified forest," she speculated. "I saw two horsemen riding through the forest when I came over here and I'm certain one of them was Blore."

Shorty snorted, his eyes flashing. "Why'n't you tell me afore? We don't aim to let no kyotes sirkelate on our range! I'll run him off—"

Shorty Winslow urged his paint into a lope. Jerry spurred Chunky, drawing alongside. As the two horses loped along, she turned toward the grim-faced foreman.

"Shorty, is there anything in the petrified forest which could interest Blore?"

"No, ma'am. Just agatized wood—acres of it. Reckon it's the largest stone forest you'd find outside the National Petrified Forest in Northern Arizony."

"Maybe it's valuable," Jerry suggested.

"This is shore fine hospitality!" Blore raged. "Put that gun down!"

"No, ma'am. Brett lets Coin Starkey pack off some now and then, but he don't charge him nothin'. Starkey has it polished—it shore takes a purty gloss, too—and sells it for trinkets in his stores. Ash trays, and such like. But, weighing about 160 pounds to the cubic foot and bein' just two points softer'n a diamond, it's shore mean stuff to cut. Starkey ain't found no very satisfact'ry way o' cuttin' it in quantities."

"Could it have any other uses, Shorty?"

"Reckon not, ma'am. It makes a heap purtier surface than onyx when it's polished. Sort o' brown, with streaks o' pale turquoise and red. But it costs like blazes to cut such hard stuff and polish it."

THEY could see two horsemen sitting on their mounts, talking. Shorty squinted his pale blue eyes, his homely face hardening.

"It's Blore and Starkey," he growled. "Here's where I run two kyotes off our range!"

Shorty roweled his paint into a run. Jerry reined in her strawberry roan to a walk.

The two horsemen saw Shorty coming, however, and cantered toward the Circle-B range. Shorty drew his paint to a stop, staring angrily after them. Jerry picked an easier way through the fallen logs that time and soil conditions had changed to agatized wood closely resembling the original trees in appearance. Beside a broken stump of petrified wood, she saw an envelope on the ground.

Ordinarily Jerry would not have stopped for it. But now the events which somehow seemed to point to this petrified forest caused her to dismount. She picked it up, glanced at the name on the envelope, and her heart faltered.

"Shorty!" she called.

He came at a lope. While the paint picked a zig-zag course through the fallen stone trees, Jerry removed a letter from the envelope. It read:

GREAT SOUTHWEST
TRADING COMPANY
Phoenix, Arizona.

Mr. Brett Lewis,
San Pasqual.
Dear Mr. Lewis:

On the seventh of this month I will be in San Pasqual. If you can meet me there at the hotel, I would like to discuss with you a matter of tremendous importance to us both.

If it is not convenient for you to leave the ranch on that day, I will ride out to see you.

Sincerely yours,
Mace Redfield,
President.

Shorty seemed stunned as he read the letter twice. Then he stared blankly at the name and address on the letter. It was addressed to Brett Lewis, no mistake! Then he uttered a sound that was like a distant peal of thunder, placed envelope on letter, and Jerry saw that he was going to tear both to fragments.

She snatched the papers from his hand. "You can't do that, Shorty! It's evidence!"

He leaned in the saddle, his blue eyes bleak, and caught her arm in steel fingers. "Evidence against Brett!" he snarled. "Give me that letter!"

He gripped her arm until it was white with pressure. Jerry dropped the letter, putting her foot on it. "You can't destroy evidence!"

THERE was a wintery coolness in his eyes as he swung out of the saddle. "Cain't I, ma'am! No one's goin' to pin this murder on—"

As he dropped to the ground, Jerry whipped out her .32 from its holster, ramming it sharply against the bow-legged cowboy's back. Her lips were white, but her hand was firm.

"Raise your hands," she said icily.

Shorty hesitated. She drove the muzzle of the small pistol sharply into his back. He raised his powerful arms, cursing. With her left hand, she slipped his .45 out of its holster, and through her belt.

"Walk over to that petrified log, turn around, and sit down!" she commanded in a steely voice. "And don't get the idea I can't shoot straight and won't shoot if you try anything funny."

His face was sullen as he dropped onto the log. "I was plumb loco to trust you!" he growled. "So yo're workin' for Blore!"

"I'm not working for Blore!" she snapped. Keeping the foreman covered, she stooped, picked up letter and envelope, and stuffed them into the looseness of her shirt. "I told you in the first place that I honestly didn't know whose side I was working on. That still goes. If Brett killed Redfield, he must take the consequences. If he didn't, I want to see that he gets justice."

"He'll never get it if you turn over that letter to the sheriff," Shorty snapped. "That, on top o' Blore's perjurin,' will convict him shore."

"Why?"

"Sufferin' sidewinders! This is only about ten yards from where Redfield's body was found. The sheriff will think from that letter that Brett went to town after receivin' that letter, met him on the way, had a quarrel after they rode over here—"

"Except for the fact that we believe Redfield was killed on the road and not on this ranch, isn't that the way it looks to you?"

"Not by a danged sight!" Shorty snorted. "I think Blore forged that letter, and planted it here—"

"That won't hold water! The envelope has been regularly post-marked in Phoenix, is on business stationery, and the chances are that there's a copy in Redfield's office in Phoenix."

Shorty's face fell. "I still figger Brett didn't receive that letter."

"What makes you think he didn't?"

"Because I usually get the mail at the box in San Pasqual. I sort it out in the bunkhouse, and take Brett's mail over to the house. I don't remember gettin' this envelope. Of course I don't make no practice o' readin' the return addresses on Brett's letters, but you cain't help noticin' 'em when they take up as much space on a' envelope as this 'Great Southwest Trading Company' name does."

"Have you any idea what this important matter Redfield referred to means?"

"No, ma'am. And I calc'ate Brett don't know, neither. . . . I been ridin' herd on Brett since long afore his paw died, and if either o' 'em had knowed Redfield, I'd of heerd o' it."

CHAPTER IV

Defiance

JERRY GARTH was thoughtful for several moments. "Shorty," she said finally, "if you'll take me to Brett, perhaps he could tell us what this letter means."

"Now, ma'am," he said, brightening, "yo're being danged sensible."

He mounted his paint. She kept the .45 in her belt as she swung onto Chunky. Shorty's loyalty to Brett Lewis was such that he might at any time attempt to recover that letter unless she kept the odds tipped in her favor.

She let him lead the way, loping along northward toward the hills. For over an hour, he followed twisting trails, cut across canyons, and stopped once in a clump of mesquite when he saw a distant group of horsemen—the posse looking for Brett.

He drew rein at last in a group of pines that commanded one peak. A spring bubbled from the ground, feeding a stream that cut southward toward the snake-like thread of the Rio Grande.

"I ain't shore he's here," Shorty said. "I ain't had no chance to speak to him since the posse come last night. But me and Brett comes here sometimes ahuntin'."

There was a bed of ashes at one spot and a mattress of dry leaves beside it. The ashes were still wet.

"That buckeroo's gettin' plumb careless," he said disapprovingly.

Shorty put his hands up to his mouth and bawled like a heifer in distress. From the woods a moment later came a sound like another heifer. Shorty drew air into his lungs, and blew out his cheeks as he answered like a calf with the colic.

Presently there was a crash in the brush, which died away. Brett Lewis appeared silently through the pines, his .45 leveled. He holstered it, and stood staring at them, his face expressionless. Once more Jerry felt the sense of Brett's power, of his clean-limbed largeness.

"Shorty," he said bruskly, "you should have known better than to bring anyone here. Only you and I knew about this place."

Shorty nodded glumly as Brett walked toward them.

"I had to, Brett. She had a letter that wouldn't look none too good to the sheriff."

Jerry's hand trembled as she reached inside her shirt for the letter. Silently, she handed it to Brett. He read it, his lips quirking in a bitter smile as she handed it back.

"That should be just what you need," he said caustically, "to convict a—a murderer."

Color burned in Jerry's cheeks. She gripped his hard arm, and felt it stiffen under her fingers.

"Please, Brett, don't hold that against me. I didn't know what I was saying. Don't you remember what happened before—" Her voice broke and she raised appealing eyes.

Dull red crept under the deep tan of his cheeks. "Reckon I ain't ever like to forget that, Miss Jerry." Then shades seemed to be drawn over his eyes, masking their expression, and he added bruskly: "Until the next time I kiss a pretty girl."

Jerry's cheeks flushed crimson. Her hand flashed out, catching him sharply across the cheek. There was a quick flash of anger in his eyes, then it burned out.

"Oh," she cried hoarsely, "I never hated any man so much in—"

SHORTY strode awkwardly toward them, his fists clenched. "Brett," he snarled, "if I was bigger and younger, I'd shore thrash the living daylights outta you. Cain't you see we're going to get you outta this somehow, and then you'll be kickin' yoreself for a ring-tailed idjit for what you jest said?"

Brett's eyes were dangerous. "Keep out of this, Shorty!"

"All right," Shorty exploded, "you run yore own show. But what you don't know about handlin' fillies 'ud fill a hull library."

Shorty stalked away, vanishing through the pines.

She laughed—a small, shaken laugh. Her eyes brimmed as she stared up at his hard, set face. "Shorty was right! You didn't mean that, Brett! You're trying to make me believe that you don't care because you don't want me to grieve if—if—"

"There's scarcely any 'if' about it, Jerry. That letter is just one more card stacked against me. Blore is out to get me!"

"But Blore didn't write this letter!"

"Maybe not. But I didn't receive it, either."

She felt as if the ground were swaying in an earthquake. She sat down shakily, dropping her swimming head on her arms. "Thank God!"

He dropped down beside her, slipping his arm around her shoulders. He buried his face in the billowy sweetness of her hair as he spoke: "Does it matter so much, Jerry?"

She nodded her head, turned it so their lips were only inches apart. "This much," she said. Her lips claimed his, and as his other arm went around her, she twisted her body so that her trembling breast was pressed tightly against his chest.

Finally he let her go, and she leaned back against his shoulder. He stared away from her, into the horizon, as he spoke again, sadly:

"Reckon I'm not much of an hombre to tie to right now."

"There's always tomorrow. Shorty and I will clear you. *We must!*" She stared through the pines at the rolling plains, cut by the gashes of arroyos, and it was several minutes before she spoke again. "Brett, could the postmaster at San Pasqual have put this letter in the wrong post office box."

"Might of. It wouldn't be the first time."

Her voice was urgent: "Who has the boxes on either side of yours? Do you know?"

"Shore. Jess Sargeant has one; Judd Blore has—" His arm stiffened around her shoulder. "I see what you're aimin' at, Jerry! This letter was put in Blore's box, he opened it by mistake or otherwise. And he met Redfield on the road, killed him, and dropped this letter when he packed the body into the petrified forest."

"Yes, yes! But why did Blore kill Redfield?"

"You got me there, ma'am."

"Well, what did Redfield mean in his letter?"

He shrugged. "If you got a letter like this one from a perfect stranger, what'd you think? Our lines don't even cross. My job's raisin' steers for market, and his is buyin' Indian truck and curios for his trading posts and sellin' 'em to tourists."

"It has something to do with your petrified wood," the girl stated positively. "Have you ever supplied him with agatized wood?"

"No, ma'am. Only persons I supplied was Coin Starkey and an Eastern inventor feller named Tom Chadbain."

"What did Chadbain want with the wood?"

"I was dickerin' with him some years ago about makin' me a certain kind o' circular saw that would cut the wood. Chadbain was plenty interested. He come out from New York, and I took him around the petrified forest. He said he could make the kind o' saw I wanted, but it would cost more'n I could swing. So I let it drop. But I reckon he kept workin' on the idea on his own hook. Anyhow, he asked me to send him some of the agatized wood from time to time. I tried to get Chadbain and Starkey together. But Starkey don't pay for anything speculative. He's tight as the bark on a tree."

JERRY'S eyes were shadowed. "If we could only *prove* that Blore opened that letter, and didn't give it to you, maybe Uncle Sam would have something to say about it."

His body jerked convulsively, as if he had been delivered two staggering blows by an invisible fist. Then he sagged.

Brett laughed bitterly. "We can't prove anything!"

She gripped his hand fiercely. "We will, Brett—we will!"

He lifted her pointed chin. Her lovely face was working. He drew her close, kissing her moist, trembling lips. She clung to him for a moment, her body shaking; then gently released herself, and turned her head away so he wouldn't see her swimming eyes.

"It looks so—so black," she said shakily.

"Not while I got someone as plucky as you workin' for me, Jerry! I feel a heap more confident than I did last night when you called me—"

She put her hand over his mouth, shuddering. "Don't remind me, Brett!" She raised misted eyes. "Hold me tight a minute, dear, then I'll go."

A low cough caused him to release her. She turned, and saw Shorty.

"Reckon you better pull yore freight, Brett," he said tersely. "The palomino close?"

"Yes; why?"

"Party o' hombres headin' this way. . . . Come on, ma'am. We got to hit the breeze afore they see us. They might suspicion something."

THE sun-spokes tinted the ragged mountains to the westward as Jerry turned Chunky into the corral. Her father was not in the house, but there was a note on the table saying he was with the posse, and would return later to eat. She built a fire of scrub juniper, and sat in front of the fire, her pointed chin cupped on a hand, thinking.

Turning over in her mind all she had learned, her reasoning always returned to one point. Blore already had so much land that taxes must keep him poor in years when cattle brought low prices. If he wanted Brett's ranch, it must be because of its one distinguishing feature—the petrified wood. At last Jerry's reasoning shed an illuminating light on the whole dilemma.

She was roused from her deep concentration by the sounds of horses in the yard. Hand on the butt of her .32, she walked to the door. Judd Blore and Coin Starkey dismounted. Hiding her fear of the men, Jerry pretended a geniality she was miles from feeling.

"Come in. Have you eaten?"

"No," Starkey cackled, "and we're shore hungry."

Jerry removed steaming beans and sowbelly from the stove, serving two plates. She leaned against the mantle as the two men wolfed down their food, wishing that her father or the sheriff would come.

Finished at last, Judd Blore turned his chair. His small hard eyes appraised her. "Miss Jerry," he said, "I saw you riding today with Shorty Winslow. Allow as how I ought to warn you that he's one bad hombre."

"He seemed pleasant enough, Mr. Blore."

"On the surface," said Blore. "But he's no better'n his murderin' boss, Brett Lewis."

That was too much for Jerry's planned caution. Her eyes blazed.

"He's not a murderer!"

Starkey's scarecrow of a body shifted uneasily in its baggy clothes as he looked at Blore. The big man sucked his teeth, scowling.

"Reckon me and Coin is the best jedge o' that, Miss Jerry. We know what we seen."

"Better than anyone else!" Jerry's cheeks were hot with anger. "No one would know better than you two how Redfield was killed."

The girl's whole body twitched with anger. The silence was strained and filled the room with an almost tangible tension. It was as if a word, a move, would cause something to crack.

Blore's small eyes were metallic. "If a man said that—" he rumbled, starting to lumber his feet.

"Sit down!" Jerry's voice curled and cracked like a whip as she drew her small pistol from its holster. "I know now how Redfield was killed!"

"This is shore fine hospitality!" Blore raged. "Put that danged gun—"

"It's all clear now!" Jerry exulted. "Chadbain finally invented a circular saw which would cut agatized wood. He needed money to build the saw, and he knew Brett Lewis couldn't finance him. Since Starkey was already producing articles from the petrified wood, Chadbain approached him for the money. Starkey talked it over with you, Blore."

Jerry was watching both men closely, wondering if she had at last hit on the truth. By the greenish tinge of Starkey's face and the dark congestion of Blore's she knew that her train of reasoning was sound.

"It's a lie!" Blore exploded. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

"THEN I'll go on," Jerry said grimly. "Blore, you realized the possibilities in acres of petrified wood, once tools could be devised to cut it readily. It could be used for fireplace mantles, and a thousand other things where onyx or marble are now used. You could market a lot of it through Starkey's trading posts in the form of various novelties. It would give you the money to pay taxes on all the vast amount of land you own. But to do it, you had to have the money to buy Brett's land cheap so you'd have enough left to finance Chadbain. And you failed there because Brett would not sell at your price.

"The inventor grew tired of waiting. He reasoned that if Starkey couldn't stake him to the money to build his cutting and polishing machinery that perhaps the owner of other trading posts could. Redfield was the man. Chadbain went to Phoenix, talked to Redfield, told him about the acres of petrified wood.

"Redfield had the money, but he wasn't going into it without being sure of the supply of agatized wood and sure that the novelties would be marketed through his stores exclusively. In order to insure that, he had to have an agreement with Brett. So he wrote Brett a letter, and the postmaster in San Pasqual, hurriedly sorting the mail, slipped the letter into your box!

"You opened that letter, Mr. Blore! It didn't say much, but it told you that what you feared most was about to happen. In your greed for money, you saw only one chance to realize our plans—to kill Redfield before he could talk to Brett. That would give you time to raise the money to finance Chadbain.

"You took one last chance of trying to drive Brett into selling the C-Bar-M before you committed murder. While he was out of the room, you stole the deed to his property from his desk. That directed the course of your future action. You and Starkey killed Redfield in the road, packed his body onto Brett's land, then raised the hue-and-cry that you had witnessed Brett killing Redfield. You hoped he'd be killed resisting arrest—but he wasn't.

"Afraid that the truth might come out at a trial, you cut Brett's bonds, hoping to shoot him when he tried to escape. That failing, too, you made a bluff that Brett had sold you his land before witnesses and handed a forged deed to my father. That would give you possession of his land and the prized acres of agatized wood if you could succeed in shooting him now that he was a fugitive from justice. But you failed in one particular. When you packed Redfield's body to the petrified forest, you dropped the letter of Brett's which you had stolen—and tampering with United States mail is a federal offense, which will hold you both until evidence can be gathered for the more serious crime of murder!"

Blore's small eyes bored into Starkey's, warning silence. Starkey seemed to have shriveled into his baggy clothes while Jerry was speaking. He misunderstood the hostility in Blore's glance—thought Blore was accusing him of talking to Jerry.

"I didn't tell her!" Starkey shrilled, shrinking away from Blore. "I swear she didn't learn from me! . . . They can't hang me. This was all your plan! You killed—"

"Shut up!" Blore thundered, his eyes murderous.

"Keep your hands away from your gun, Mr. Blore!" Jerry snapped. "Stand up—both of you."

They rose, and Starkey's knees seemed to shake like those of a newborn calf.

"You'll never prove your story," Blore exploded. "I'll fight—"

"You forget Chadbain's still alive," Starkey piped. "He knows—"

"Keep your mouth shut!" Blore roared. "Let me handle this!"

"Turn around!" Jerry commanded. "Back up and keep your hands in the air!"

Sullenly Blore obeyed, backing toward her. Starkey shuffled backward, his scrawny arms shaking like breeze-blown saplings.

With her gun covering Starkey's back, she drew his gun out of its holster, tossing it behind her. But even as it clattered on

the floor, she caught a blur of movement out of the corner of her eyes.

She swiveled the .32. Not fast enough! Blore hurled himself at her legs as the deafening roar of her gun echoed through the room. Screaming, she went spinning to the floor, and Blore's hands reached at her, tore wildly at her hand that still held the gun.

The .32 slithered out of her reach.

Starkey pounced on it.

"Shall I shoot, Judd?" he shrilled. "Shall I shoot?"

Chapter V

In Cold Blood

JUDD BLORE sprang to his feet with a roar, ripping the gun from Starkey's hand. "You're the dangdest fool I ever saw, Starkey! Do you want to bring the posse on the run?"

Roughly, Blore jerked Jerry to her feet, and pushed her sprawling into a chair. Her eyes blazed with mingled wrath and fear, but she said nothing as he stared at her. Her hands dropped to her lap, as if in desperation and she leaned forward forlornly.

Finally he said, while his eyes slowly traveled the whole length of the girl's trembling body. "Ought to shoot you. It's the surest way o' keeping you from talking. But it runs against the grain to shoot a woman. If I could think of any other way—"

"You got to shoot her!" Starkey shrilled. "Even if she promises not to talk, she won't keep her promise once she's loose!"

Blore glared at Starkey. "When I want your advice, I'll ask for it. Keep your lip buttoned, ma'am, if you don't want me to do like Starkey says."

FOR several minutes he was silent, thinking, then a hard gleam came into his small eyes. "I see a way out. Theer's a Mex cattle baron named Miguel Lisandro who crosses the Rio Grande frequent to buy or sell cattle. There's ways o' getting cattle across the border without getting caught. Never see the man that he don't talk about getting himself a beautiful American wife. He's got a scar across his face which makes the purty ones skittish, but he'd treat you right, Miss Jerry. Anything you wanted—except he ain't got American ideas about a wife goin' places unless her husband is along. His peons would see to it that you stay home, and what talkin' you do to them won't do us no harm."

The girl's face was white. "You can't be serious!"

"I ain't got no choice!" Blore snapped. "You should be plumb grateful that I'm giving you a chance to live."

"He can't marry me without my consent—and I'll never give it! I have seen Lisandro. He's hideous!"

"But good-hearted and rich," Blore smiled bleakly. "And, after he's taken you to his haciendo, if you don't want to marry him, that's your business. A beautiful girl is what Miguel wants, not a marriage certificate!"

Jerry sprang to her feet, her eyes flashing. "I'd rather be killed!"

She started to scream for help, but at the first sound, Blore caught her in his powerful arms. He pressed one brutal hand over her mouth, and the touch of its clamminess sickened her with revulsion. She kicked furiously at him, but she couldn't break his grip. His face was close to hers and she shuddered at the look in his eyes, was nauseated at the foul breath that fanned her cheek.

His lips traveled to her shoulders, and she heaved up quickly, caught him under the chin so that he bit his lip.

He swore at her, raised one hand and slapped her hard across the face, finger marks tracing long red lines across the perfection of her cheek. Then he grabbed her again before she could utter a word, pinched her nostrils together so that she couldn't breathe. She was weak and gasping for breath when he dropped her roughly into a chair.

Blore turned toward Starkey. "Get movin', Coin! Lisandro's at the hotel in San Pasqual now. Tell him that I've found an Americano gal for him, but he must get her across the border tonight."

Cackling, Starkey picked up his dropped gun, and shuffled out. The drum of his horse's hoofs died away.

"Make yourself comfortable," Blore said, his voice almost genial.

She watched him with stinging eyes as

he dropped into a chair before the dying fire and built himself a smoke. He picked up a coal to light his brown-paper cigarette, and leaned his big body slightly forward as he stared at the fire, smoke trickling from his nostrils. He looked like a successful cattleman, almost genial except for the hardness of his eyes.

Jerry stared at the door, her senses straining for the sound of approaching horses. How long before her father would return? If only other men were with him! He might not be back before Starkey returned with Miguel Lisandro!

Time crawled as Blore sat there, smoking an endless chain of brown-paper cigarettes. Finally he observed her stolen glances at the door.

"Reckon you better wish your paw doesn't return," he said. "I wouldn't have no choice. I'd have to shoot him." He sat silent for a moment, smoking. "Funny how one thing leads to another, ma'am. Never thought I'd be killin' a man or marryin' a decent American gal to a Mex, against her will."

"You wouldn't be, if it wasn't for your greed."

"Reckon you're right," he agreed, without rancor. "It's like when you have a-holt a bear's tail. You grab all the land you can, any way you can. Then you got to meet taxes. You see a way out with this petrified wood, but a man stands in your way. A bullet clears the path. Redfield dies. Then you mess in things which don't concern you, and I got to give you to a Mex. I'd shore like to have you myself, ma'am, if things was different."

The girl shuddered. "You're as cold-blooded as a snake!"

"Mebbe so. But it's like I said. One thing leads to another."

Jerry sat thinking, a cold, hard lump in the pit of her stomach. Finally she said with a breathless effort to be casual:

"Could I turn the milk cow out to graze? She has a calf, and dad always turns her out at night." Jerry could have added that her father also turned out the calf, which was now only three weeks old and still needed its mother.

Blore regarded her suspiciously.

"Oh, keep me covered with a gun," she said sharply, "if you're afraid I'll try to escape."

"Reckon I will."

He followed at her heels as she walked out to the feeding pen, slipped the three rails out of the fence. The cow sauntered through the opening, and the calf trotted after her. But before the calf could pass through, Jerry cried, "Shoo! Back with you! You've had enough milk!" She put the bars into place. The calf followed its mother along the fence anxiously.

Scarcely had they returned to the house when there was a loud bawl from the calf. The calf bawled louder and louder. But Jerry pretended not to notice it. And Blore scowled, intent with his own thoughts.

An hour crawled by. Jerry's nerves were ragged with strain. At any moment her father might return from the chase . . . only to die at the hands of a man he considered his friend!

Finally Jerry could stand it no longer. She rose, pacing the floor. The calf continued to bawl vigorously for its mother. The windmill creaked and groaned as a breeze stirred the fans. Blore planted his chair by the door as if he read her plan to dash out into the darkness.

Suddenly Jerry's nerves quivered as she heard the distant *clop* of a running horse. She tried to make more sound as she paced the floor, but Blore had heard. He stepped to the doorway, listening, his hand on the butt of his gun. Then he stepped out into the porch as the *clop* grew louder.

JERRY'S throat was tight. "That can't be Lisano yet," she said huskily. "Mr. Blore, I'll marry that horrible creature—I won't tell dad anything—but don't shoot."

His voice was steely. "Stay where you are if you don't want this gun smacked down on your head."

"Please," Jerry begged. "I'll ride away with you; I'll—"

"Silence!" he exploded. "If you say another word—"

The rider was racing toward the house now. Unsuspectingly entering a trap! Judd Blore's extended arm grew taut, his fingers rigid on his .45. Jerry's eyes widened with horror. Cold blooded murder! . . .

(*Continued on page* 85)

GUNSORE RANNY

Warren coolly hefted the bottle in his right hand as the incensed Ramon pulled the knife on him.

BART WARREN sat on the dirt floor of the *'dobe* and stared sullenly at the girl sitting on the cot made of rough-hewn wood and woven strips of rawhide.

Warren took a long pull at a bottle of rye, and set it down on the floor. He wiped his lips with the back of his hand. His shaggy hair grew down to the collar of a grimy shirt; his chin was dotted with a sandy stubble, and his scowl hardened a face that was young in spit of its angles. He lurched to his feet, then walked steadily across the room and caught the girl Lolita's shoulder.

She murmured, turned so that her face was almost buried in the crook of his arm. Warren mumbled, "You sure can get drunk in a hurry! It is positively the damnedest!"

Now that the kinks were out of his long legs, he walked effortlessly. His balance was perfect when he scooped the bottle from the floor and gulped the last few ounces of whiskey. He stepped to the table in the corner near the open hearth and picked up some tortillas. They were cold, like leather. He ate two, and cleaned up some cold chili.

He fumbled around in the back room, which was almost as barren as the front. "Where the hell is that whiskey?" he asked aloud. Warren talked to himself because Lolita's conversation never amounted to much. A red dress, a few kisses, bits of gaudy jewelry—she couldn't think farther than that, which was why he liked to have her around the house.

He looked about the room. Red dresses hanging from wooden pegs. Red shoes with very high heels. She hated stockings, and she always went barefooted around the house. Warren began to laugh, a little too loudly. "Wouldn't Emily love this? She'd know what to talk about!"

The sun was low now, sinking behind

BY RALPH SEDGWICK DOUGLAS

A combination of bad luck and his own folly had put this galoot Warren on the skids and now he appeared to be hogtied to a lower rung on the ladder of life. No longer was he a big cattle baron with every whim becoming actuality at his beck; they all thought him loco, and done —but one fact escaped them all

Illustrated by
Newton H. Alfred

the shacks of Aztec Springs. And Warren was drunk enough to leave the little *'dobe* at the outskirts of town; sober, he would not leave. In the front room, he paused beside Lolita.

"Beats me how she can get drunk, unless she snitched that bottle."

A COOL breeze sneaked across New Mexico, and dust kicked up by hard-riding cowpunchers rose against the sun. For all the thousands of cow critters that had died, for all the notes that had sunk Bart Warren, there were still cattle in the hills, and some would live. He began to sing.

"Oh, I've got a million hosses,
And I've got a million steers,
I got a great big blazing thirst,
And I could drink a million beers. . . ."

He did not stumble. He did not stutter

or mumble. That quart was building up, and now he could face Aztec Hill. Six months ago, he had been a cattle baron, owning half of New Mexico. And a bank. And there was Emily Barnes, who probably was also broke by now, following his directions on becoming a cattle queen.

He was near the flimsy frame shacks and "hotels" just short of the center of Aztec Hill. Two chemical blondes leaned over the window sill. It took only half an eye to see that one was white and shapely, and that the other was white and not so shapely. The newcomer saw Warren and waved. "Yoo-hoo! Come on up!"

He had paused for breath, and was about to go into the next verse, when the old-timer at the sill screeched, "You don't want that drunken—to come up, Gladys! The—is crazy."

Warren looked at the two women, and shook his fist. "Crazy, am I! Listen here ——"

"Aw, peddle your papers, tramp!" she sniffed. "What do you know about white women?"

Warren did not have any answer. It was a funny world when two women like that talked that way to a cattle baron.

He passed the express office, where the stage stopped on its way to Arizona and California; then the ugly brick cube, the Aztec Trust & Savings. It had opened up again. He'd owned a lot of stock until although he'd never seen the bank until after he'd lost all his cattle. There were miles of range, thousands of cattle he had bought, and had never seen them.

When Warren stepped into Lem Hatfield's General Store, the old man came from his living quarters in the back, and set his silver-rimmed glasses down on his nose. "Ho, Lem. Give me a quart for supper and a quart for breakfast."

He laid a gold piece on the scarred counter, and sniffed the odor of plug tobacco, bacon, kerosene, and overalls.

Lem fumbled, then straightened up and turned back to the counter. He planted one hand on the cheesecutter and coughed, then said, "Uh, it ain't my business, but you'd oughter drink at the saloon, with the crowd, Mister Warren."

"Shut up, you old fool! Quit using that name."

"Shucks, I didn't mean no harm, I heerd you shouting to the hull town how you usta own the bank."

"They believed it, too." Warren scowled, and scratched his head, and lingered for a moment with the bottles under his arm.

Lem gave him his change. "You got fare home?"

"Home! After I came out to make a name for myself. Scientific cattle raising. Cattle raising as an orderly enterprise—" He laughed uncontrollably for a moment. "Then the 'Leveler'!"

"That's jest it. One of them years what makes a rich man pore, like the pore man that can't get any poorer. Look at that English duke or suthin', he's been froze out. Look at the Rincon Cattle Company. Shucks, ain't no disgrace, you going home. Old timers is froze out, too, and they got nowhere to go. Look at Emily Barnes, she's—"

"Shut up, you old fool!" He thrust his hand palm first into Lem's face. "I'll knock your head off!"

He stalked out. Lem readjusted his glasses. "Pore critter, too dang ashamed to speak his right name."

OUTSIDE, Warren remembered that he had cuffed an old man, the only friend he had in Aztec Hill, the only man who knew his former status. Warren sat down in the doorway of an insurance office and opened a bottle. He raised it, looked at the little brick bank, catty-corner, across the street. "Cattle baron, huh?" He took a long, gurgling drag.

He took a second and a third. He began to forget Emily Barnes who had risked her inheritance on the strength of his enthusiasm. It was pleasantly warm here in the doorway.

Back in the *'dobe* at the outskirts of town, a kerosene lamp glowed behind a window shaded by a *serape*. A sleek-haired young Mexican held the lamp while Lolita squatted in a corner with a knife in her hand. She was digging and poking in the angle of the fireplace.

"I don't know where that *cabron* keep the money," she said, and flung the knife into the opposite corner. "He do not trust me."

Ramon set the lamp down and caught her hand. "Maybe he wear the money belt, no? Maybe is no money?"

Warren began to laugh at Lolita, a little too loudly.

"Tonto!" She sniffed. "Without, how you buy whiskey?"

"Verdad," Ramon agreed. "Me, I do not care. But your brother, Jose—"

Lolita was not a bit drunk. "Look, can I read the mind? Do I not throw out the whiskey, so he goes for more? Maybe you can find, no?"

Ramon laughed. "Me, I am not interest in money."

He drew her toward him. She clung to him, ardent and gasping. But she protest-

ed, "No, *querido, no*—he is not drunk too much yet—if he come back—"

Ramon chuckled and turned the lamp very low. "I have Jose watch him. Maybe this rich gringo bury the *dinero,* maybe some friend keeps it."

"Friend! Is got no friend, that one. He sits here all the day, he says he is think about something. Sometimes I am afraid, is getting worse."

But Ramon was not interestd in case histories.

TWO dance hall girls came down the board walk, on their way to the Rainbow Bar. The moon was out, and the breeze tugged at their long capes. Their tinsel bodices gleamed, and their powdered bare shoulders were like tombstones in the brilliant moonlight. One stumbled over the outthrust feet of a man who sat in an insurance office doorway.

She caught her companion for support, but in the shuffle, a high heel twisted in a knothole, and the pair landed.

"You drunken son," one screeched, "get your damn' hoofs—"

Bart Warren straightened up. He rose to help the kicking girls.

Snow Hitchings, the town marshal, was making his rounds. His beard trailed white in the breeze, his thin face screwed into a scowl. "You, there,Bart! You're getting to be a public nuisance, pestering ladies. 'Tain't nothing wrong with a man taking a couple too many, but you can't lie around this away, tripping up ladies."

Warren yawned. Back on the Diamond W, at Palo Verde—but this was now. "All right, marshal, all right. I am a bum, and I got to get drunk in private."

Snow might have said more, but the stage was clattering in to town. The smell of sweating horses and of leather; the jangle of harness, the driver shouting to the relief man. Weary passengers uncramped themselves and stepped down to the dusty main street. The shotgun guard leaped down and went to the express office with a satchel. Money coming into the west again.

Money! The jingle of gold, of twenty pounds of coin, tickled Bart's ears, and he came nearer. He'd started out with that much of the stuff, and built it into millions in a couple boom years; he'd bought Hereford bulls for three thousand dollars apiece, he had bought stallions, he had laid out everything but a way of feeding critters in a bad year, or sheltering them in a bad winter. With twenty pounds of gold, a man could get a fresh start, he could go home again with honor.

Then he saw the girl's legs. She had beautiful, sleek legs, and very small feet. The moon made that all clear, and then a man in a frock coat stepped up to help her to the street.

The shadow of her hat hid her face, but the pale gold of her hair twinkled through. Bart knew already who the girl was. There never had been more than one woman with such ankles. He wanted to run, but he could not. Then she turned from thanking the stranger who had helped her, and she saw the bare headed grimy man who stood in the bitter cold moon and stared; unshaven jaw sagging, big fist clenched about a bottle neck. A full quart was thrust into his leather vest.

She made as if to speak, and finally she succeeded. "Bart, I thought you'd gotten rich at—at—everyone's expense."

Emily Barnes, broke but lovely, and on a stage headed west; back to San Francisco, probably. He snarled, "Rich, hell! Why, you damned nitwit!"

Humiliation choked him, and he stumbled down the dusty street. Where he belonged was with that drunken dark wench whose thoughts found their limit in red dresses.

In less than an hour, it would be as if Emily had never passed through. He drank from the bottle as he went. And he straightened up. What the hell, Lolita would be sobered up now, she'd kiss him and call him funny things and beg for more red shoes.

CHAPTER II

The Drunkard

NO telling what would have happened if Bart had been singing,

"I got a silver plated steamboat,
A-floating down the Rio-o-o Grande,
She's loaded up with likker,
And a big brass band. . . ."

Usually he did sing, but now he was thinking of Emily and what she had

thought of him. To convince her he had not feathered his own nest, had not been able to warn his friends would be easy; just let her see him a little longer. But that was what he did not want and could not stand. She was broke, but she'd not gone to hell. With no pride, she could go home. He couldn't.

But you don't have to explain to girls like Lolita. She was nice to have around the house. Can't count beyond five. What with Lolita and whiskey, a man quit worrying.

"Very soon I shall be unable to count beyond five, and I'll feel great," he told himself. "The trouble with people is they count too much."

He began to grin at the moon. You had a million horses, and a million steers and a million dollars and a million friends. Then a "leveler" and you are a dirty—— who let his friends hold the bag. Just like that, all gone! But Lolita!

Lolita wouldn't vanish because of a couple pieces of paper he'd signed.

Warren moved lightly now, and he was almost happy. He skirted the *'dobe,* and entered the back door, for it was an elaborate *'dobe,* having two rooms.

THE lamp was turned very low and the chimney had sooted deeply, but Lolita did not notice the fumes. She was drowsy, flushed, and her hair was all disheveled, and perspiration made her thin red dress stick to her like a coat of paint. She started when the hinge creaked, and so did the handsome Mexican. Then she sereamed, and Ramon leaped for the knife that lay on the table.

Warren's grin froze, and that was what frightened Lolita. A man had no business standing there smiling. Ramon snarled, *"Chinga'o!"*

Outside, a man yelled, while his feet were still pounding the hard earth, "Quick, he is gone!"

But it was too late for Ramon to leave. Jose, Lolita's brother, had taken too much for granted.

Ramon darted in, knife point first, the thrust that is so hard to block. Lolita made a lunge to seize Warren's arm, and she screeched to Ramon, "Wait, he is drunk."

Warren's left hand swept out and Lolita's calves hit the narrow cot. She did a loop, landing on the dirt floor.

At the same time, Warren had seized the bottle neck with his right hand, drawing the quart from his vest. He was not hurried about it. He had never been so cool. He smacked down on Ramon's knuckles and they smashed. The knife dropped. Ramon's lungs carried him on, paralyzed with pain.

The Mexican slid against Warren and slammed to the *'dobe* wall. Warren pivoted, measured the fellow, and cracked down. The bottle shattered. So did most of the man's head. And then Jose arrived on the run, knife in hand, yelling.

Warren sank to his haunches, and shot out his hand, still gripping the neck of the broken bottle. Lolita screeched, and bounced up from behind the cot. She landed on Warren's shoulders, but it was too late. The jagged glass had torn her brother's forearm, and the blade no more than raked the big man's scalp. It was a crazy maneuver, but it had worked. Warren dropped his weapon and tackled his man; he shook Lolita from him, and she skidded in the pool of whiskey and blood.

He took a frantic slash that had more force than aim, and then he smashed the Mexican against the jamb. The impact knocked Jose breathless. He went limp, and sagged into a puddle of liquor and broken glass. Warren went wild. When a girl who can't count to five sells a man out, he sheds his college education. He booted Jose twice, and the last kick caught him under the chin.

Warren heard but paid no attention to the sharp snap that followed, but he began to guess the result when he saw that Jose's head lolled at a crazy angle. He laughed, and said to Lolita, "You dirty——, I'll break your neck, too!"

SNOW HITCHINGS came pounding across vacant lots, his beard trailing in the breeze. He had seen Jose break into a run, and had followed him mainly on suspicion. Probably the greaser had stolen something. But when he arrived, he saw what had happened, and he guessed why. The old man said, "Bart, you're a no-good fellow, but there's times I can feel for you."

Lolita returned from her flight to the

front room. Snow sized everything up, and shook his head.

Lolita began to shriek and accuse Warren of murder, but Snow spat tobacco juice at her bare feet and snapped, "His house, and not theirn, and you wasn't expecting him home. Shut up!"

He turned again toward Warren, who was now shaky at the knees from exertion, from the subsiding of his wrath, and from seeing what he had done with bare hands, boots, and a broken bottle. "Bart, these here are just two no goods, but it don't look right, this kind of goings on. And you been a public nuisance, annoying white women."

Warren began to laugh. Snow gave him a sharp look, and backed away a little. He resumed, "Best way to fix this is you getting outa town, quick. I'm ordering you out. These two slick skunks has more kinfolk than a dog has fleas, and if you get yourself murdered, which you will, I'll be a dang sight more embarrassed than I am now." He made a clucking sound, shook his head. "Damn it, damn it, and I been running a law-abiding town. There's a stage leaving for Ingersoll Gulch, Tucson, and San Diego. You got fifteen minutes to make it."

Warren shrugged. "It's funnier'n hell, marshal, me fighting about a Mexican girl."

He walked out, after absent-mindedly picking up a dirty Stetson that had once cost over forty dollars. Lolita stood there, mouth sagging. As he approached the business block, he heard her wailing. He said to Snow, "I'm not taking that stage."

"What you mean?"

Warren was looking in through the fly-specked windows of the stage depot, and saw Emily Barnes. She was eating apple pie and drinking coffee as if she had not a care in the world. Already, loafers were collecting, and Warren heard them buzzing about the killing. Some other shack dweller had carried the news. Someone muttered, "The crazy—, he's dangerous."

Another said, "I'da killed the gal too, by gravy!" The speaker barged in through the sagging screen door with his partner, who said, "Damn if I wouldn't, myself. He bought her more red shoes than a dozen gals could wear. Bart's loco I guess, but he ain't stingy."

Warren turned to the marshal and repeated, "No, I ain't taking that stage, put me in jail."

"You idiot, I reckon you don't know this part of the state. There's so many Mexicans inside of forty mile that they'll go to war, they'll chop down the jail and hang you, and I ain't having no scandal, you git out right now. Don't git fresh, bub, if I was to shoot you fer resisting arrest, it'd prevent a scandalous lynching of a white man."

"Go ahead, be damned to you."

Snow mopped his forehead, he was sweating. "Listen here, you look like you once amounted to suthin, I'm asking you like a gent, will you get out? Why don't you want to get out?"

Warren jerked a thumb toward the window. "See that blonde girl with the blue plume in her hat, and the tailored gray suit? She was going to marry me when we'd both made a million. That's why I won't want to ride on this stage."

"Gosh, I 'low you'd not. But you got to—"

VOICES broke into the discussion. Hob Saunders, the livery stable keeper, was saying to someone, "If you don't pay for that fodder for your crowbaits, I'll seize the critters and sell 'em for glue, you stinking sod-busting squatter, you reckon you kin cheat a honest business man outen the price of oats?"

"Now, look yere," a weary voice came back, each syllable dragging, "I am busted, but my hosses has et, and put me in jail, and the Lawd'll hate your guts, I got to get on but if I can't, I can't, and I hope you rot. I wish'd I et some of them oats myself."

Warren's face changed. "Marshal, let me talk to this man."

The stage driver was bawling. "All aboard for Ingersoll Gulch and points west!"

Warren crossed the street, and the marshal after him. "You make it quick, you got about one minute!"

Warren looked at fat Hob Saunders, and the lean, bearded man who wrangled by lantern light. The stranger was skinny as his horses, and as ready to drop. He wore ragged jeans and a slouch hat. He had a heap of old furniture and household goods in a wagon whose tarpaulin looked

like a patch quilt. He was monotonuosly repeating, "But I got to get going. My brother Ab is waiting for me, you skunks ain't got any heart, and the Lawd'll punish you."

Warren said, "Hob, I'll pay the score." He fumbled in his pockets and found a dollar. Then, to the stranger, "Give me a ride, they are running me out of town, too."

"Mister, where you aiming to go?"

"Any damn' place." He flipped the dollar. "Who cares?"

"The Lawd'll remember you," the lean man said, solemnly, and climbed to the seat, which was padded with old gunny sacks. "I'm Jefferson Clayborne Smith, suh, and mighty proud to know you."

"They call me Bart, when they can't think of something dirtier," he said, as Mr. Smith cracked the whip. "Go right ahead, I'll get a bottle and catch up with you."

"Mister Bart," Jefferson Clayborne Smith said, severely, "I don't tolerate drinking people around me. I hate to talk disrespectful to a gent that's a-benefacted me like you have, but I can't put up with drunkards."

Warren was too shocked to argue. He bounded up to the seat, and the two crowbaits began dragging their hoofs west.

CHAPTER III

Hold-up

THE stage clattered past Jefferson Clayborne Smith's wagon and left it in a cloud of alkali dust and grit and burrs. "Shaking the dust of that there city offen my feet," Jeff said, solemnly, "is what I'd done right away, if my hosses hadn't needed fodder."

"It is not a sociable place."

Somewhere, a coyote yip-yipped, and in the opposite quarter, one answered with a ghastly wailing. The chilly wind scattered the thick dust of the stage, and the night swallowed its sound, so that soon there was only the sorrowful creak and rattle of the buckboard. Jeff said, "Cooler traveling, this way."

As the night wore on, Warren's liquor wore off. He felt a little dull and let down, but otherwise not bad. At drinking himself to death he had proved as much a failure as at being a cattle baron, or at holding the affections of a girl who couldn't count past five. Funny, he was heading west, like Emily, who with her pie and coffee had heard all about the girl in the red dress and the massacre.

Jeff droned on, scarcely pausing to lock the slowly rising dust from his thin lips. "I knowed Providence would pervide. When things git jest that bad—"

"They get worse," Warren cut in. "And I wish I had a drink."

Jeff dug into the tangle of pails and pots and implements behind him and brought out a canteen of luke-warm water. Warren took some of the brackish stuff, and said, "Not criticizing your hospitality, but this is a hell of a drink."

"Reckon it is," Jeff answered ."I usta be a scandalous powerful drinker, I had a dent in my nose from hoisting a mason jar, like I'd wore specs. But I got religion, and I quit the demon rum."

"Clayborne? You Louisiana people did make lots of rum."

"No, ain't been in Louisiana since grandpa died. What I drunk was corn whiskey, but they always called it the demon rum. I sure was a mighty drinker, but I quit. And I used to run around with women, suthin scandalous."

"Quit that, too?"

He had. His reformation was thorough. Warren said, "I think you're right there. Liquor is comparatively harmless."

AROUND dawn, Jeff pulled up at a waterhole. Warren did not know how long the crowbaits could carry on without food. But when he saw the three bags of oats in the back of the wagon, he said, "This is a lot of fodder for a dollar, I'd say."

Jeff smoothed out his tangled beard and grinned slyly. "Heaven pervides. I histed 'em in whilst the hosses was eating what you paid for. So I reckoned it was time to shake the dust of Aztec Hill offen our hoofs."

They ate bacon, and warmed over beans, and sour dough bread that made Warren hungry for Lolita's leathery tortillas and chili. He was ready to drop of weariness, but Jeff chattered on, "My brother Ab's a failure, he's taken up land but he ain't

prospered. So I'm aiming to go out and show him how. Mebbe he's drinking or suthin."

Perhaps four hours after sunrise, heat devils were dancing over the plateau. The only shade was a few cacti that reminded Warren of giants holding their hands up in horror at the desert. It was a long way between water holes, not at all like the lovely country where he had set out to be a cattle baron. It was so hot that one might as well travel. So they set out.

Warren began sweating out his liquor. His head spun, and his hands trembled, and he heard voices. He missed that steady saturation with whiskey, his skin crawled, and once he thought Lolita was whispering in his ear, saying she'd forgiven him for killing her brother and her lover.

For a moment, he thought he'd kill Jeff; that was when the bearded man said, "Ants usta crawl around in my boots when I quit drinking. But the righteous shall pervail, brother."

Finally that day ended, and toward sunset, Warren felt better. He looked back at those Aztec Hill weeks as glimpses of some other man's life. He began to wonder if anyone would ever find the thousand dollars in gold he had cached under the floor of Aztec Hill's haunted house. He'd been too dizzy to think of chicken feed when old Snow ran him out. Who could think after that meeting with Emily?

But for that meeting, he'd have laughed, slapped Lolita and forgotten about her trickery. And Ramon would some day have killed him, after jealous brooding. Only that fury had saved him. Life was funny.

Ahead, in a ravine that gashed the mountains which loomed up, someone was shooting. There was still light in the open, but purple shadows darkened the rocky cleft. Pistols roared, rifles crackled; a shotgun boomed. It seemed that men were yelling, horses squealing; but echoes played crazy tricks with all sounds. Jeff squinted at the tracks ahead, and the hoof prints. "Reckon some sons of Belial is holding up the stage."

"What stage?"

"One that passed us, with the driver cracking the whip like Jehu."

"You're crazy. That's way off to Ingersoll Gulch now, hell-fire, we haven't reached the first relay station."

"Course we ain't, I took a short cut. Ab sent me a map. Look at the wheel marks, ain't nothing but a stage, look at the way the hosses was stepping, 'tain't no freight wagon, and there's only one stage twicet a week. Gotta be that one."

IT began to sound like a siege. The passengers were putting up a fight. The shotgun no longer boomed. Emily Barnes must be in that smoky hell up ahead. In this corner of desolation, neither Emily nor any other woman would fare any too well in the hands of road agents.

Warren had no artillery. He never toted a gun, except when hunting. His cowhands, his foremen, they handled all the details for a cattle baron. Like his former neighbor, the Right Honorable and now bankrupt Cyril Fortesque, Warren had held that what the west needed was more business management and less melodrama now that the Indians were caged up on reservations.

A crazy notion struck Warren. A man who has been run out of a crummy cow town for fighting about a girl ought to die like a man, regardless of how he had lived. Better than going mad, hour by hour, riding with a crack-brained yokel who misquoted scripture. He laughed, bounded from the seat, and started up the pass.

"Hey, where you aiming to go? What you aiming to do?"

Jeff was actually speaking fast. Warren turned around. "I'm cleaning out a nest of skunks."

"Ain't right, tempting providence. You come back here."

"Thanks for the ride, Jeff!"

Jeff let the reins go and the crowbaits slumped, heads between their knobby knees. "You idiot, a man oughta have a musket or suthin. Here, you wait, I got some weepins."

It still sounded like a pipe dream, that droning human scarecrow and that nasty crackle of guns. But Jeff fumbled in the mare's nest of a wagon and pulled out a muzzle-loading shotgun and a single shot Springfield .45-70. The latter was a Civil War discard. He thrust it into Warren's hands, with a few cartridges. As Jeff bounded along, keeping up with Warren's long strides, he said, "You smite 'em from one side, I'll git 'em from tother!"

A woman lurched from the riddled door of the coach. She stumbled over a dead passenger in her terror.

They separated as they rounded the angle of the defile. Ahead, in the murky shadows and billowing powder smoke, Warren saw gun flashes. The stage was stalled, the team slewed around, three of the horses dead, the others down and kicking, screaming, all a tangle of hoofs and leather. The driver was ready to drop from the footboard. The guard was on the rocky floor. If there was any money box, Warren could not see it.

The fire slackened, and ceased. There

were groans from the stage, a woman's shrill scream. Four men scrambled down from the rocky slope, yelling, holding their Winchesters at the ready. They were masked; but two had bandages that hid part of their blue kerchiefs. Two others, motionless, were sprawled where they had apparently fallen from their shelters.

A woman lurched from the riddled door of the coach. Her hat was gone, her pale yellow hair was streaming. She stumbled over a dead passenger, and rolled among the rocks.

One of the gang chortled, gestured. "Lemme give you a hand, m'am, we ain't hurting you, we jest want your joolery."

"Look out, you damn' fool, mebbe they ain't all shot," a prudent fellow suggested. "That there's bait."

The girl screamed, flung a rock, and tried to get up to run, but her bruised legs could not support her. Warren, bounding up the slope, wasted no words. He'd changed his mind about suicide, which he could have achieved by challenging the gang. He stopped, leveled the rifle, and deliberately shot the fellow in the stomach.

THE old .45-70 boomed like a siege gun, and the cloud of black powder smoke blotted out everything. There was a howl, two wild shots. Warren dropped among the boulders as lead zinged about him, and jammed home another cartridge. Then a weird voice howled from the right, "The sword of the Lawd and Gideon!" The rest of the quotation was swallowed up by the gusty boom of a shotgun.

Jeff had arrived. Lead sizzled in every direction. A crazy fusillade, jerked by panic-stricken men. Warren lined up the old rifle and blasted away at one of the bandits. Another rumbling and the whistle of goose shot. Wild yells, a clatter of dislodged rock; a man howled, "I told you it was a ambush, damn it!"

The survivors were scrambling over the barricade that had stopped the stage, Hoofs clattered; horses with riders and horses with empty saddles galloped down the pass. The unwounded wheel team kicked loose from the strained harness and stampeded.

Warren fired another shot from the barricade. Then he turned, and saw that Jeff was coughing, leaning on the long barrel of his shotgun. He crumpled, and Warren barely caught him.

"Come here, you! Give me a hand!" Warren yelled at the girl, who sat up, dazed from the shots that had cut loose within arm's length of her ears. "The party's over!"

It was Emily Barnes. There was still enough light for recognition at close range. She hobbled nearer, and cried, "Oh, Bart, I thought I was—they were going to—I didn't have a chance—everyone's dead—"

"Tear off some of that petticoat, and help me. Where they get you, Jeff?"

The man clawed his chest. The wound was low enough to make it doubtful whether he would last long enough to benefit by bandaging. He choked, looked up at Emily, who was ripping her petticoat.

"I'm dying, and I don't want no Jezebel —with lace on her—" He made a gurgling sound. "If I hadn't been a-looking instead of shooting—when she was a-kicking them silk stockings—I'da got—him fust—"

He tried to brush her away from him when she knelt.

"I sure wisht I had some whiskey. Git away, Jezebel, I wanta pray."

Warren was thinking fast. "Look here, Jeff. Remember the fellows that the—uh—woman hid on the city wall."

Jeff's face twisted. "All right, all right. But I sure wished I had some whiskey."

Warren mopped his battered face, and said, "I second that one! Emily, let's have that bandage."

"I thought you were—Bart, I'm sorry ——"

"Forget it, look what Jeff thinks you are!"

CHAPTER IV

The Promised Land

WARREN and Emily rearanged the junk in the wagon and made room for Jeff. The passengers who had defended the stage were dead. Warren asked, "Where'd the money box go? I can't find it anywhere."

"There wasn't any. A last minute change of orders, but the guard went anyway. We were delayed by breaking an axle."

"No money, then why the shooting?"

"Oh, this crazy country!" Emily was

on the point of going to pieces. "One of the passengers swore that no road agent would get his grandfather's watch. Another had a hundred in gold. The third was a fighting man just as a matter of principle. So was the guard, and the driver just hated road agents. Maybe they were defending me—Bart, darling—" She clung to him sobbing. "Take me to Ingersoll Gulch, come home to San Francisco with me, get me out of this awful country, it's done its worst for both of us!"

She wasn't hostile and probably she had never been. Now, low as he had sunk, he was useful. Maybe it was hysteria that made her cry, made her kiss him, sink her fingers into his shoulders. Maybe she had really missed him, maybe her heart had been hurt more than her bank account, and she was happy to see him and to know that he had not profited at the expense of his friends. Warren did not know what the answer was, and it did not matter. He was stirred by the ardent embrace but there was even more to arouse the drunkard of Aztec Hill.

And that was the fact that he had become useful, something he had never been before. Buying miles of range, buying blooded bulls and stallions, buying up banks—all paper work, of no use to anyone. Warren straightened up, and gently loosened her arms from his shoulders. "Honey, I can't take you to Ingersoll Gulch, it is too far for Jeff to ride."

She drew back, and groped for words. "Why—what—I don't understand."

"You and I are going to take Jeff to his brother's place. It is not far from here. It is closer than Ingersoll Gulch and the stage."

"I won't stay in this wilderness!" Her voice rose to a scream. "You fool, taking a wounded man further into this country. He needs a doctor."

Jeff spoke up. "M'am, begging yo' pardon, but y'all are teched in the head. Ain't no doctor can do a thing for me, I won't live till I git to Ingersoll Gulch. Bart is a drunkard and a sinner, but he's aiming to do a man's last will. Mebbe I can see my brother Ab and counsel him how to make a success, like I been. I come out here to share my goods with him."

She had seen the goods, and the horses, before darkness hid the details. She laughed crazily, "Oh, good Lord, if you're a success, what's your brother—?"

"Shut up," Warren snarled, "or I'll slap you till my hands wear out!"

He gave her a sample, one-two! She stopped seeing the humor of Jeff seeking a poorer relative. But she said, "Go ahead then, go ahead! I won't budge, I'll stay here."

Warren sighed. "Honey, if you were in your right mind, I would leave you here to guard the dead I cannot bury, because delaying will rob Jeff of seeing his brother. Now, do be reasonable."

"Don't you touch me."

He got a piece of rope. "Must I tie you to the seat? You are coming with us. Among other things, you will attend to Jeff. I'll have my hands full with these horses. You nitwit, have you stopped to think that if Jeff hadn't come along the road agents would be matching pennies for you?"

That sold her. She let him help her to the wagon. Wedged in among rusty implements and decrepit furniture, she found a place beside Jeff. Warren cracked the whip, and the weary nags leaned galled shoulders against their collars. At the end of the backtracking, for the wagon could not pass the obstacle in the narrow pass, Warren skirted the mountains. There was an old road, Jeff said, that got to Ab's district.

For the first day, Jeff took the rocky trail without a groan. Emily seemed to suffer more than he did. And then the wounded man became delirious, singing hymns, yelling for whiskey, giving his brother good advice. It was a madhouse on wheels, and at times Warren began to think that he should have headed for Ingersoll Gulch. It would be a nightmare trip, delivering a dead man, and then returning with Emily.

Any nags Ab could furnish would be no improvement on walking!

And when Warren fianlly cleared the crest that overlooked the land that Ab had taken up, he was surprised. It was worse than anything he had imagined. What cattle there were made the two nags look fat. A whole cow would barely make a sandwich. Later, when more snow melted, there would be grass; the place did have

water; but would any critters be there to eat or drink?

He said to Emily, "The promised land, darling!"

Jeff said, "Amen!"

Jeff had not only lived, but he was on the mend. This was almost as unbelievable as the fact that his crowbaits had made the trip.

Rock and cactus; Ab had assumed that as long as there was water, there would be enough grass. Like Warren and other cattle barons, Jeff's brother had never heard of over-grazing. Warren learned this soon after reaching the little sod house at the foot of the slope.

Ab looked a lot like Jeff. Another crackpot. He spent a moment pondering on each droned out word. Hunger and fanaticism made his sunken eyes feverish. He helped Warren carry Jeff into the hovel.

Emily, ragged and grimy from the long drive, recoiled from the door and cried out. Warren gave her a dirty look; that shut her up, but did not take the horror from her face, particularly when Jeff sighed and said, "Jest like home, Ab, reckon the chikens'll mind us crowdin' em out!"

Three hens ran out, squawking. Ab said, "Reckon we'll be eating them. Ain't et them yet. The coyotes has, most of 'em. Didn't have enough vittles or nuthin."

The sod house was dark, without any window. There was a pile of straw in one corner. A fire place, a few battered utensils, all reeking of bacon grease. Ab squatted beside Jeff, when they laid him on the straw, and said, "Wasn't quite certain whether to raise cows or to dry-farm."

"You never was worth nothing at farming, Ab."

"That's jest it, so I reckoned it ought to be cows. Something that multiplies without ploughing. But blame it, they ain't multiplying at all."

Warren caught his breath, and retreated to the door. Emily caught his hand. Before she could speak he said, "Keep still, honey! You and I are two more who thought that cows were something that 'jest multiplied without ploughing.' This poor devil got in with a few dollars, we got in with a few thousand."

"Let's see what kind of horses he has," she said.

THERE was a brush lean-to that served as a barn for a pair of nags. Out in the least rocky stretch a plough was rusting. A battered saddle hung on a peg. The wagon that had brought Ab to this corner of hell had lost a wheel. A pair of saplings, wired on in its place, made a drag that had somehow kept it on an even keel.

"Wonder where the dog is."

Emily shuddered. "The coyotes ate him, I guess. Bart, I'm glad now you brought me here. I feel different about our failure. I still have a few dollars—"

She unpinned the tattered blouse, and fumbled in her bosom. She was no longer white, but tanned almost as dark as Lolita. She found a wad of banknotes. She had abandoned the bullet-riddled suitcase whose contents had been soaked with a dead man's blood, and now she was sorry for her squeamishness. "We'll buy Jeff's horses, this will be a fortune for him. Oh, lord, imagine getting to civilization—even Ingersoll Gulch! Bart, don't look at me that way! If I could only find some soap!"

Warren folded her fingers about the bills. "Put them back. We're not leaving for a while. We are staying here until Jeff is fit to work. You're taking care of him."

"Are you crazy?"

She drew back. He caught her by the shoulders, and so she could not thrust Warren away when he took her in his arms. He said, "We can't leave those crackpots to starve, which is what they'll do, if there's only Ab and an invaild."

"Let's go," she gasped.

But Warren held her. He crushed her in his embrace, and he kissed her as he had used to kiss Lolita. "You little nitwit," he breathed in her ear, "try being useful for once in your life. I was a damn' sight lower than you ever dreamed of being, and what gave me a fresh grip was having you and Jeff on my hands."

"Don't be a fool," she protested, and tried to wriggle free.

This was not the exquisite city girl, the prospective cattle queen Warren had treated with deference her kind demanded. All the frills were gone, all the veneer; she was just a nitwit who might amount to something if she lost some fool ideas. The fool ideas that had made him gold and power greedy; that had done the same for

The survivors were scrambling over the roadway barricade.

her. She was just a woman, slender but entirely as shapely as Lolita, and not a great deal different from the Mexican girl after all.

"Who the hell said you could count beyond five?" He smothered her lips with his mouth. "It's just you and me, two fools, we can't get to the top until we've hit bottom."

She ceased sruggling. Her protests were incoherent. She whispered, "Bart, I never really knew you." Her mouth softened, and turned up, yielding; her lashes drooped and hid misty eyes. She snuggled closer,

wasted a side glance on the two sorry nags, and said, "So we ought to hurry to civilization . . . we can't waste any time . . . "

"Civilization! Here's where we start, and now."

Then Ab came out of the sod shack, and called, "Oh, Mis' Warren, it's getting time you fixed us some vittles."

That cracked the spell. Warren cursed and stepped out of the lean-to. "All right, *Mis Warren*, primitive customs prevail here. No gent is going to sully his hands on a frying pan when there's a woman to do the job. Even if your hair is not curled and your face is dirty, you are a very beautiful woman in many respects."

"Bart," she murmured, "back there, you made me feel like one."

CHAPTER V

The Backslider

THE ragged tarpaulin was hung up to screen a corner of the sod hut for Emily. Warren went out with Ab to save as many of the starving cows and calves as he could. With a sickle, a pitchfork, one saddled nag and one bare-backed plug, the crackpot and the cattle baron set out over the hungry range.

Ab was perplexed. "Dang if I can figger it out, some of 'em a-bawling and dying afore they's plumb starved."

Warren had at last found someone who knew less about the cattle business than he did, and that broadened his chest. He said, "Get busy picking up dry branches. Make a fire."

"Whut fur? We ain't branding critters, we fergot the iron, I got a nice one. It says 'A-B', that's the way you spell my name."

"I'll show you when there's a blaze. Give me your horse."

Warren mounted up, uncoiled the mildewed rawhide riata; you couldn't rope a hitching post with it, but it would serve his purpose. The starving cows had been trying to eat cactus, and the poor creatures were riddled with the treacherous spines; no wonder they bawled and died. So when he reached a clump of cactus, he hacked it down with the sickle, and dargged it to where Ab was building a fire.

Warren cut off the cactus blades, scooped up a few with the pitchfork, and held them over the flames. Ab gasped, scratched his shaggy head. "Gosh, if that ain't the limit, toasting cactus!"

"That burns the spines away, and the critters can eat. Get busy, while I bring some more."

An old rancher had told Warren about that trick. It would work on a small spread, but there was not enough cactus for miles around to feed a cattle baron's starving thousands. The animals usually crowded around, waiting for fodder, but Ab's sorry beasts did not; they had never learned to associate the ideas of man and food. Also, as is the way with their kind, they gave up, and were indifferent. So Warren had to haul a wagon load of cleaned cactus to groups of the starving.

The next day, he said to Emily, "Jeff can tend to himself, part of the time. Put on his boots and come along."

"Why? Good heaven, I've not begun to clean this pig sty, running the hens out keeps me busy every minute!"

"Never mind the dirt. You scramble up among the rocks where the cows couldn't get, even before they were weak, and get grass, the old dry grass."

She stared at him, looked in dismay at her broken nails, her red hans. Warren snatched her by the shoulders. Jeff raised his head from his pallet of dirty straw and looked a lot stronger. Warren said, "We're saving them! Damn-fool you and damn-fool me, we let them starve by the thousands!" He raised both hands. "I've seen so much starving, I never want to see any more. Get going, cattle-queen!"

She readjusted her shawl, and followed him. The man had her buffaloed. And that afternoon, she was feeding the cows that still had strength enough to eat. She helped Ab and Warren carry calves to the mothers who could not turn back to rejoin their offspring.

That night, Emily was ready to drop. She was too tired to hate Warren. She was so tired she began crying, and when he saw her eyes, he followed her out into the chilly gloom. "Better eat," he said, "even rancid bacon and the oats we stole from the horses."

"I want to get out of here!" she said, fiercely. "Those two, with all their psalm

mumblings, spend most of their time peeping—"

"They couldn't, without stepping over me and waking me."

"Oh, I didn't mean through the tarpaulin. Look at this skirt. Look at everything."

HE held her away from him for a moment. "Well, not *everything,* darling. But I hadn't noticed." Her brows rose, and he hastened to add, "That was tactless, I guess, and just as rude as noticing. You're as bad as Lo—er, I mean, this is the first time I've ever been so downright absorbed in anything that I didn't notice lovely legs and so forth like yours."

"Now, don't try to smooth it over with cheap flattery," she said, but her eyes smiled at him.

"I'm not. I had time to notice things when I was a cattle baron, so called. When I was winning a million on paper. But now—darling, we're really wining! There's grass coming up. There'll be enough for the survivors. Hang on!"

She did hang on, and when their lips parted, at last, she said, "Make me a little sod dug-out. Ab and Jeff, oh, I don't blame them, they can't help it, but it gives me the creeps the way they look at me. I've hidden all the .45-70s and the powder. I'm afraid those fools'll ambush you, and wouldn't I be in a mess!"

"You'd be no better off in your own little hut."

"I would! I wouldn't be within three yards of them, for them to think about!"

So in the morning, Warren took time out to set up sod walls. He roofed the hut with brush. That afternoon, when the job was almost done, Ab came bouncing along as fast as his crowbait could wobble. He yelled, "Bart, damnation! Them cows is sinking plumb to China!"

"What?"

"They's sinking outa sight!"

He turned the horse, and rode toward the stream. Warren dropped his tools and ran after him. Emily said, "I'm going, too! I won't listen to any more lectures on the evils of drink!"

She ran after him, and they went upstream.

AB was not as crazy as they thought. Three cows had bogged down in treacherous sand when they went to drink. They still had not enough strength or courage to try to fight their way out. Ab was groaning, "Wat'll I do? I dang neart strangled her with the rope, and this hoss can't pull the hat offen your head nohow!"

"I'll jump in and twist her tail!"

"Oh, don't," Emily cried, "you'll sink into quicksand, too."

"I won't. My feet aren't sharp as a cow's. Neither are yours. Pile in with a club, wallop her while I shoulder her rump!"

Emily was getting used to almost everything. She just stared, shrugged resignedly, and pulled up her skirt. "Take it off!" Warren said. "Between the water and the cow—anyhow, there's some lace left!"

There was. Clubbing the creature was wasted, but her hip bones thrust out as far as her horns. Warren and Emily braced each other, shoulder to shoulder. "All right, Ab, get going!"

Ab kicked the crowbait. The cow bawled and got stubborn as the rope became taut. She managed to flick her tail and slap Emily between the eyes with soggy tuft, all loaded with burrs.

"Heave!"

Warren twisted the critter's tail. He slipped, and he and Emily went down in the icy water. She lost her shawl, and what garments remained hung in dripping shreds. Before she could sputter any protest, Warren helped her to her feet and said, "Try again!"

After an hour of exhausting struggle, they got the cow to the bank. She promptly collasped. The chances were that she would die of exposure and exhaustion. But if they snaked out all the critters, a few would survive.

Jeff came to meet them when they finally set out for the farm house.

"Reckon I've mended enough to help, like I aimed to. Feeling mighty spry, considering everything."

The worst was over. Those that still lived would put on weight. They'd multiply; there would be a few calves who would outwit *lobos* and coyotes and panthers, and the Indians who sneaked from the reservations to beef a few cows to supplement the

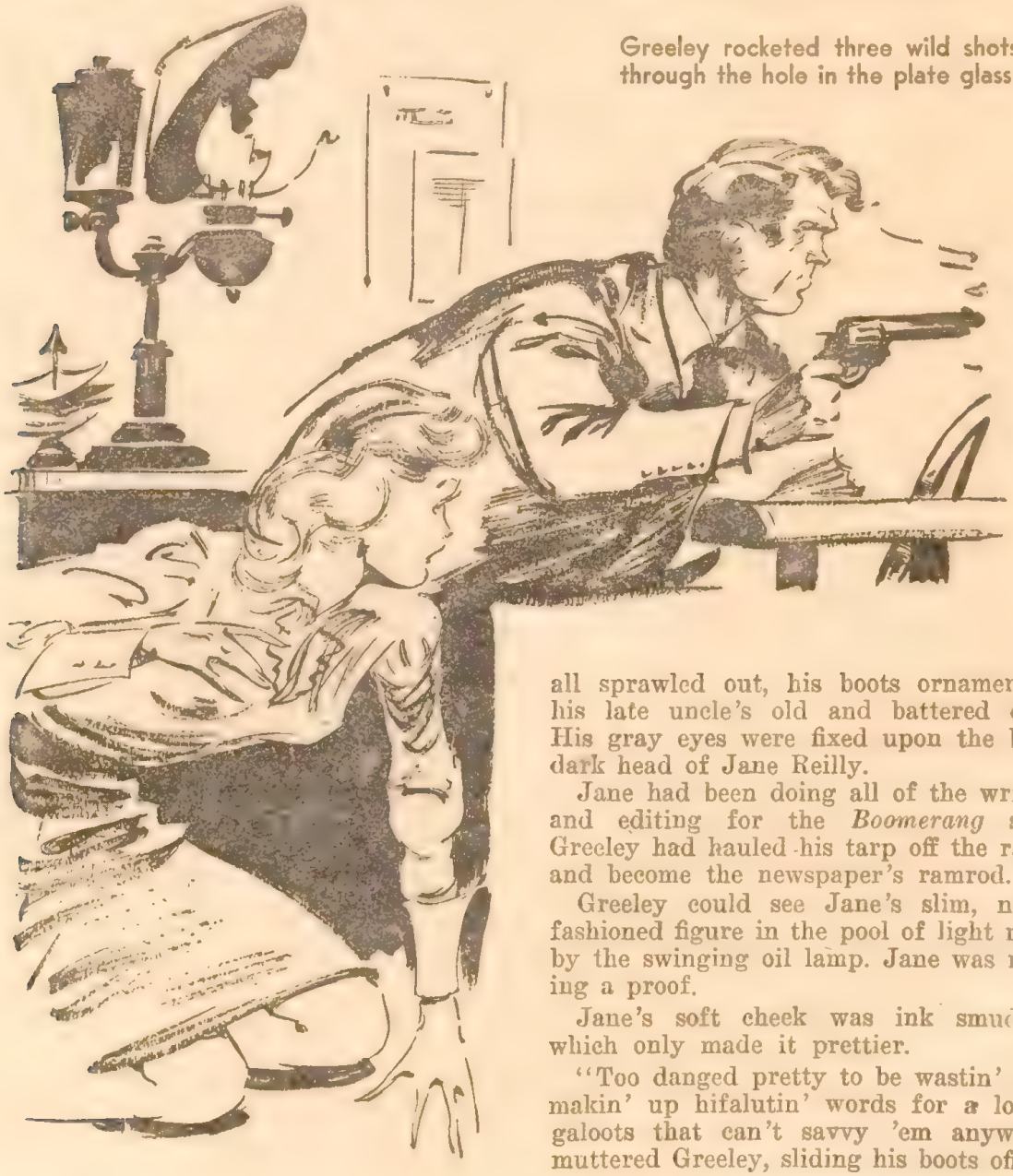
(*Continued on page* 86)

That Salt Creek Kid

H. GREELEY BIM was enjoying himself hugely in that quiet moment before blasting shots ripped through the ramshackle office of the Big Basin *Boomerang,* the town's one and only weekly newspaper. Greeley Bim had inherited the paper through the sudden and still unexplained demise of his uncle Bartholomew Bim, only a few weeks before.

Greeley had been branded early in life with the full monicker of Horace Greeley Bim. The name had been at the behest of this same departed Uncle Bartholomew. Despite the high-sounding and journalistic implication, Greeley had been up to the time of his uncle's sudden taking off, a hard-riding, quick-shooting cowhand.

Just before the six-gun crashed its lead through the only plate glass window in the town of Big Basin, Greeley had been



Greeley rocketed three wild shots through the hole in the plate glass.

all sprawled out, his boots ornamenting his late uncle's old and battered desk. His gray eyes were fixed upon the bent, dark head of Jane Reilly.

Jane had been doing all of the writing and editing for the *Boomerang* since Greeley had hauled his tarp off the range and become the newspaper's ramrod.

Greeley could see Jane's slim, nicely fashioned figure in the pool of light made by the swinging oil lamp. Jane was reading a proof.

Jane's soft cheek was ink smudged, which only made it prettier.

"Too danged pretty to be wastin' time makin' up hifalutin' words for a lot of galoots that can't savvy 'em anyway," muttered Greeley, sliding his boots off the

BY MAX NEILSON

For a rootin'-tootin' cowpoke of H. Greeley Bim's sort to be suddenly planted in the editorial seat of a frontier newspaper was certain to produce unexpected complications — including blowoffs with bandits, and boomerangs . . .

Illustrated by Joseph Sokoli

desk, and pulling a new printed sheet under his eyes.

Jane's red lips parted a little as she looked up and smiled at the edge in his voice.

"Somebody has to write the news for Big Basin," said Jane cheerfully. "It's the only chore I know, an' I need the job. I guess that even such folks as can't read, will find out what that big headline means, Greeley."

"Yeah," grunted Greeley, perusing the double line of type at the top of the single sheet, which had just come off the Washington hand press. "Reckon this'll be headin' the *Boomerang* sprang into more trouble, the same as polished off Uncle Bart. That's another reason for me thinkin' it'd be best to hire on a gun-slingin' ink peddler, anyway until this sheriff campaign's cleaned up."

Jane's smile was a little tight as she said, "An' what would little Jane Reilly be doing then to earn her grub? Wantin' I should take on a job of slingin' hash over at the Trail House?"

"Nope!" snapped Greeley shortly. "I've got other ideas!"

"I've been noticin' that, too," said Jane. "But for the present I'd prefer to

stick to roundin' up history on the run. Now—"

GREELEY'S eyes went back to the double headline of this edition of the *Boomerang*. Tomorrow some five hundred copies would be distributed throughout the country.

"ELECT TOM COLTON FOR LAW AND ORDER!"

"FOLKS WANT TO SEE THE SALT CREEK KID!"

Although he was responsible for the double line, Greeley could see trouble, possible gun-ruckusing growing out of these leading editorials on the first page of the *Boomerang*. Greeley wanted both Jane, and Weemer, the old printer, out of the way when that issue of the *Boomerang* hit the country.

First, Greeley was backing young Tom Colton for the job of sheriff against old John Huber, the incumbent lawman. For Sheriff Huber had been tied in so long with the Wild Horse saloon crowd and other lawless elements of Big Basin county he could scarcely be regarded as a real lawman.

His late Uncle Bart had left to young Greeley the job of seeing that John Huber was beaten and that law and order would be restored to the county.

Next came that Salt Creek Kid headline——

Some two weeks ago, Sheriff John Huber had played a mighty big card looking to his own re-election. He had announced the capture of the notorious mystery bandit and killer known only as the Salt Creek Kid. Now, according to past reports, the Salt Creek Kid was tied in with an even more dreaded owlhooter, branded as The Cougar, a cattle-rustling, stage-robbing, claim-jumping outlaw who, like the Salt Creek Kid, had kept his real identity a secret.

Greeley scowled now, as his mind came down to cases.

The bringing in of the Salt Creek Kid was a big play for Sheriff John Huber. It was made stronger by Sheriff Huber's announcement that he was close upon the trail of The Cougar himself.

But thus far, Greeley Bim and others of Big Basin had only the word of Sheriff Huber and his tough man Friday, Deputy Jim Bunt, that the mysterious Salt Creek Kid was safely locked in Big Basin's stone jail. Sheriff Huber had announced he was taking no chances on having his prisoner exhibited, and maybe bring on a lynching.

Especially, Sheriff Huber had put out that he wanted the Salt Creek Kid to have a rightful trial, and there would be no more violent justice in Big Basin county if he had anything to say about it.

So, for two weeks, the *Boomerang* had been hammering at the one question, "Who is the Salt Creek Kid?"

This story now, written by Jane Reilly, at Greeley's instigation, was downright open in doubting that Sheriff Huber really had captured the Salt Creek Kid, or any other outlaw killer.

A few lines of Jane's story said—

"Many persons have reported seeing the Salt Creek Kid in stage holdups and two bank robberies in the county. But no individual has given any description, except that the supposed Salt Creek Kid rides alone, is light and slender, and always wears a silk hood mask. Is it possible that Sheriff John Huber has jailed some defenseless saddle bum, and hopes to be re-elected by palming his prisoner off on the public as the Salt Creek Kid?"

THE street outside the town's only plate glass window was dark. Greeley's thoughts concerning Jane Reilly stirred him into motion. He pushed the newspaper aside.

"You're right, Jane," he drawled. "Corralin' history on the run may be a nice job. Wisht I'd learned more about it sooner. But right now I'm thinkin'—"

Right there a crashing short gun whammed hell out of a corner of the plate glass window. Smashing lead put out the swinging oil lamp above Jane's head as Greeley's boots hit the floor and he made a belated grab for his own six-gun.

Greeley racketed three wild shots through the hole in the plate glass, but he had no target. He heard Jane cry out. He had not trusted himself too close to Jane up to now. As he gathered her slender, trembling figure into his lanky arms, he understood why he hadn't trusted himself.

"I'm not hurt," gasped Jane. "Maybe old Weemer was hit."

"He went out five minutes ago," growled Greeley, still holding Jane tightly to him.

It was too dark to see her, but Jane's soft, pretty face was pressed close to the tough hide of Greeley's neck. Somehow Greeley had the queer notion there was but one way to assure himself that Jane wasn't hit.

So he kissed her suddenly. During the ensuing ten seconds he was sure lead had teetotally missed the slim, dark girl. Likewise, he was altogether unprepared for the wildly impulsive reaction that set her arms gripping his neck tightly and abruptly, and forever changed the relations of the *Boomerang* boss and his girl editor.

Jane clung to him until he began to feel dizzy, and he freed her hands.

"You slip out the back way and go home," he told her. "I'll be over shortly with a hoss, an' you be ready to take a few days pasear in the hills until the election's all over."

"I won't—" she began hotly, then, "An' where are you goin', Greeley?"

"Up the street," he said grimly. "Now do as I say, an' stay under cover until I come back."

This time the unexpected kiss was reversed. It was warm and promising.

"This job of recording history on the run has its advantages," she murmured. "You be careful, Greeley. I'm not sure I'm running out, but I'll be waiting at my shack."

H GREELEY BIM had his .45 ready in his hand as he slithered along a wall of Big Basin's one street. He saw but one shadowy figure moving. The one bright spot in town was the yellow glare cast by the oil lamps of the garish-fronted Wild Horse saloon.

Greeley saw the single shadow slip into an alley alongside the saloon. He was in the alley when the saloon's side door made a quick lighted oblong and then was closed.

"Sure, Curt Saunders would have a hand in that shootin'," gritted Greeley. "I ain't been in Big Basin long, but I know damn' well that most of the crooked trails lead to the Wild Horse bar. An' unless I'm mistaken, that shootin' was intended to draw me down here. A'right, Saunders, here I come!"

Hot anger was pounding through Greeley's pulses. His uncle had been murdered. No doubt Sheriff Huber, backed by Curt Saunders and his gun-slinging killers, had counted upon Greeley being too raw and green a cowhand to continue the campaign of the *Boomerang*.

Having miscalculated Greeley, now they were set to throw a scare into him. The election, day after tomorrow, was the crucial time for Sheriff Huber, the Saunders' outfit, and outlawry in the county, if they were to survive in the face of the candidacy of young Tom Colton, who was backed by the law and order citizens.

"And Big Basin county pretty well follows the *Boomerang's* lead for rightful justice," said Greeley under his breath, striding along the alley and hammering with his gun butt on the side door of the saloon.

There was no response. Greeley shoved the door wide open and stepped quickly inside. He saw a dark corridor, apart from the main saloon. A pencil crack of light showed under another closed door.

Greeley guessed this must be Curt Saunders' private hole-in-the-wall office. He hammered his gun upon the plank door. A hard voice rasped out, "Come in, Greeley Bim!"

Three hombres confronted Greeley in the small, ill-lighted room. Big Curt Saunders was wide of shoulders. He sprawled in a big chair and stared at Greeley out of pale, fish-like eyes. His thin mouth was twisted derisively.

Deuce Billings, a snaky-eyed, little gunfighter, stood in a corner, his pliable, stained fingers touching the butt of a gun. The other man in the room was Sheriff John Huber himself. Huber was gaunt-jawed and hatchet-faced, but his shifty eyes proved that he had long been accustomed to taking orders from the side on which his bread was the most thickly, if unlawfully, buttered.

Greeley ignored the snaky-eyed gunman and his ready iron. His voice dripped with contempt as he spoke.

"I'd heard the sheriff was out lookin' for The Cougar," he said scornfully, "with the idea of matchin' him up with the Salt Creek Kid to help his election, if he has the Salt Creek Kid?"

Sheriff Huber's eyes held murder, but

they went to Curt Saunders, and it was Saunders who spoke.

"Thought you'd took over the chore o' runnin' the *Boomerang,* Greeley?" said Saunders insolently. "Never heered as that included tryin' to become the law a' Big Basin. Anyway, Sheriff Huber's got a line on The Cougar, an' he's goin' after him tonight. Seein' he ain't no chance o' loosin' his office, you might as well begin takin' things as they come, Greeley. Your uncle made the mistake—"

GREELEY cut in wrathfully: "I ain't makin' no mistakes, Saunders! Nobody that means anything to decency has seen the Salt Creek Kid! The *Boomerang* editor ain't permitted to visit the jail, so's you can claim anything. But what I come about was the gent who shot up our office tonight, an' then come sneakin' in your side door."

Saunders licked his thin lips and grinned.

"Maybe if you'd be nice to Sheriff Huber, an' tell him about it, he could round up the gent for you, Greeley?" he suggested.

"If I put my eyes on him, I don't need help of any crooked wearer of a tin badge!" snapped Greeley. "I'll take care of him personal an' final."

"See him around here anywhere?" said Saunders mockingly.

Greeley shook his head. He knew he was up against a blank wall trying to put his hand on the gunman who had sent that warning blast into the *Boomerang* office.

"No, I don't see the yeller belly in here," said Greeley.

"Maybe then," suggested Saunders, "you'd better git out."

Greeley's gray eyes fixed Saunders' fishy orbs for half a minute.

"Maybe I'd best get out," he said softly "Maybe so, before your swamper has to come back here an' clean up a bloody mess."

He pushed out through the door and through the barroom. He could feel a dozen pairs of hostile eyes upon him. Then it was that he started cussing himself silently.

"Dammit! They was wantin' to get me away from the office! An' I fell for it like some chuckle-headed yearlin'!"

GREELEY found his *Boomerang* office crowded with town folks. As he went in, old Weemer, the printer, said, "Reckon nothin' was busted 'cept the light, boss. Maybe so they'd be wantin' you to change the makeup o' the sheet 'fore the election day after tomorrow."

Deputy Brunt, Sheriff Huber's man Friday, was poking around.

"Guess it was nothin' but some likkered gent lettin' off steam," said Bunt through his tobacco-stained mustache. "All the same, if I was you, Greeley, I would be destroyin' them copies of the *Boomerang* you got stacked up. Them questions about the Salt Creek Kid looks like you're on the wrong side, seein' I know the Salt Creek Kid's locked up an' safe against any violence that'd hurt the sheriff's chances o' bein' elected again."

Tom Colton was a lightly built fellow, and he had been doing freighting from the rail-end up to Big Basin. He was quick on the draw, and the way he had staved off The Cougar's owlhooters and the Salt Creek Kid a couple of times had made him a logical candidate for sheriff against Huber.

But Colton's blue eyes were full of trouble as he faced Greeley.

"I'm thinkin', Greeley, maybe so you'd best change sides," he said. "Saunders'll sell his soul to keep Huber in office. If you quit backin' me, maybe you'll live longer."

Greeley's broad mouth was a straight line. "The motto of the *Boomerang* is 'Justice First,'" he said grimly. "It'll take more than lead to line me up with the Saunders crowd. You ain't any idea o' backin' out, have you, Colton?"

"Nary such an idea," agreed Colton promptly.

Deputy Bunt spat from the corner of his thick-lipped mouth. He pawed one hand across the headlined weekly newspaper.

"If that goes out, Greeley, all us lawmen can do won't save you," he advised. "An' if you're so damn' good, Colton, whyn't you go out an' bring in The Cougar an' prove you've got guts. We know he's back in the Saddle Rock country, an' maybe Sheriff Huber'll have him alongside the Salt Creek Kid 'fore another day passes."

As Deputy Bunt clumped out with a

"What've you done with Jane Reilly?" rasped out Greeley, stepping toward Saunders.

dirty grin, Tom Colton said, "Greeley, that's worth thinkin' about. If I could round up The Cougar himself before election, it would maybe make folks think less o' Huber grabbin' the Salt Creek Kid."

Greeley shook his head mournfully.

"The Cougar's hidin' out in the Saddle Rock *malpais,*" he said, "an' we'd never be able to locate 'im. That country's all badland mountains, brush, and canyons. I've chased hosses in there a dozen times, an' allus lost 'em."

Greeley felt himself beaten at this moment. He was a good cowman, but his Uncle Bart's newspaper was something he didn't understand. He could ride and rope and shoot, but he could not string words together to make sense, the way Jane Reilly could do it.

"By hokey!" he exclaimed to Tom Colton. "That makes me think. I've got to be ridin' Jane out've Big Basin until all the election ruckus blows over. An' if I was you, Tom, I'd watch my step. Saunders would like nothing better than to pin gun trouble onto you or get you out'n the road some other way."

"Reckon I can take care of myself," promised young Colton. "I'm ridin' back toward the Saddle Rock hills just on a hunch."

GREELEY walked out to the edge of town. He secured his own horse and

had another one saddled at the livery stable. Ten minutes later he was at the boarding house where Jane Reilly stayed.

Mrs. Wharton, the plump proprietor, eyed Greeley with wide eyes.

"You come for Jane?" she exclaimed. "Why, she put on her ridin' togs an' went right out when she got your note, Greely."

"Got my note, Mrs. Wharton?" said Greeley anxiously. "I didn't send her any note. I told her to be ready to ride."

Deep concern lined Mrs. Wharton's fat face.

"You know I 'lowed I'd seen that little coyote before," she said. "The one that brung the note, an' said you'd sent it. Maybe he was the Mex that's been swampin' up at the Wild Horse saloon."

Greeley swore under his breath. He walked the horses along the street and stopped several friendly citizens. None of them had seen Jane. It was as though she had vanished in space.

Greeley was fully aware now that he was the victim of a trick. The shooting and the flight of the gunman into the side door of the Wild Horse had been framed with the deliberate purpose of getting him out of the way. No doubt Jane had been the direct object of this trick.

Greeley hitched the horses in front of the Wild Horse. He went striding into the barroom, fully aware of the sudden silence that fell upon the place. He headed directly for Saunders' office, his fingers itching upon the butt of his .45.

"Bigod!" he grated under his breath. "I'll find out what's happened to Jane, or I'll blast Saunders into mincemeat while he's still alive!"

GREELEY strode straight to the door of Curt Saunders' office. He slammed the door open without the ceremony of knocking, and stepped inside. He saw the same three men in the smoke-filled room, Curt Saunders, Deuce Billings, and Sheriff Huber.

Deuce was watchful, as usual, his ferret eyes upon Greeley and a hand close to his iron. Across the smoky room, Saunders laid a paper on his desk and gave Greeley a rat-trap grin.

"I figgered you'd be comin' along, Greeley," he said. "We was waitin' for your play."

"What the hell've you done with Jane Reilly?" rasped out Greeley, taking two steps toward Saunders.

Greeley made the mistake of passing Deuce Billings as he moved. Deuce arose suddenly and stabbed a gun barrel into Greeley's side.

"Freeze, right where you are!"

Helpless fury flowed through Greeley. This whole thing had been a trap, and he had walked into it. Why in hell hadn't he got his drop first and talked afterwards? He lifted his arms slowly.

Saunders' voice was slow and mocking.

"You've got a rep for being quick on the trigger, Greeley," he said. "So, just in case—"

Greeley felt his own gun being lifted from the holster and its shells being emptied from the cylinders. Then Saunders shoved a white paper across the desk.

"Here's the news you'll put out in the *Boomerang* tomorrow, in place of that stuff about the Salt Creek Kid," said Saunders. "You will print another five hundred sheets and send 'em out, and I'll have men waiting to see that they cover the country 'fore election."

Greeley's hot eyes read—

COLTON HELPS KID ESCAPE!

"The *Boomerang* has been notified that the Salt Creek Kid escaped jail last night. Deputy Sheriff Jim Bunt was knocked out. It is learned on good authority that Tom Colton, who was a candidate for sheriff, aided the Kid to escape. Deputy Bunt heard Tom Colton demanding the whereabouts of five thousand dollars stolen by the Salt Creek Kid in a recent bank robbery. Unfortunately, Sheriff Huber was absent, being in the hills searching for The Cougar, now known to be an accomplice of the Salt Creek Kid.

"As a result of this sorry affair, the Big Basin *Boomerang* advises all good citizens to vote for the re-election of Sheriff Huber, Tom Colton's opponent in tomorrow's election."

Greeley lifted his eyes slowly from the fantastic story.

"Of all the damn' guts, Saunders—"

Saunders nodded, with a hard grin, "To be sure, Greeley. But you take that over

and old Weemer can run off the five hundred copies tonight. And I happen to know that Tom Colton is off on a wild goose chase after The Cougar. The Cougar isn't where he thinks he is, but by the time Colton gets back, the election will be over—"

"I'll see you in hell first!" raged Greeley.

Saunders' mouth screwed into an evil O. He shoved a beaded handbag onto his desk. The initials JR were worked into it. Greeley's spine was ice as he identified Jane's handbag.

Saunders' pale eyes gleamed wickedly. "Of course you've heard about how The Cougar don't keep his women long," said Saunders softly. "The little lady who owns that bag is right now in The Cougar's camp. The Cougar may be overdue at the gallows, but he's a friend of mine."

Deuce's gun barrel rapped Greeley across the side of the head as he swore and jumped for Saunders' desk. He was forced to halt.

"Now nothin' happens to the little lady," drawled Saunders, "if them issues of the *Boomerang* are printed. An' if they ain't—I'm not so sure that same little lady would be wantin' to come back, after The Cougar has passed her along to his men—"

GREELEY would have killed then. His hand struck his gun butt before he recalled it now was empty. Even if it were loaded, the gun could not help Jane Reilly now.

He spoke through thinned lips, his voice barely audible.

"If anything happens to that girl, Saunders, I'll kill you with my bare hands."

"Sure, oh, sure," agreed Saunders. "That'll be day after tomorrow, after the election. Do I get that story printed now?"

It would mean the finish of the *Boomerang*, of H. Greeley Bim. It would mean the defeat of the trusting Tom Colton, the re-election of Sheriff John Huber, whose smoky eyes surveyed Greeley.

Not to print it meant gambling with Jane's life, or much worse. Greeley went sick as he thought of The Cougar's woman-hungry outlaws back in the wild hills. There wasn't any choice. Greeley's big body sagged.

"I guess you get the story, Saunders," he said hopelessly.

As he went toward the *Boomerang* office, Greeley heard and saw nothing. His mind was working sluggishly. He failed to figure any way out of the trap. Jane Reilly meant that much to him.

Greeley shook his head. Printing that story meant throwing the decent people of Big Basin county to Saunders' wolves. Yet there seemed to be no other way.

GREELEY BIM issued swift instructions to old Weemer, the printer. The oldster went to the type case and started to work. Greeley went back into the office, looking at the regular copies of the *Boomerang* already printed for distribution.

A desperate scheme was growing in his brain. He recalled that Sheriff Huber was still with Saunders, and that he had been drinking too much redeye.

Greeley called old Weemer abruptly. He talked rapidly and a grim, skeleton smile showed across old Weemer's toothless gums. Old Weemer chewed his tobacco and nodded, silently, understanding.

When old Weemer went back to sticking type, Greeley took an oiled lamp and went down into the building's musty basement. It was cluttered up with trash, but the walls were solid stone. The door leading downward was heavily barred from the outside.

Greeley's nerves were on edge. Time crawled. Just after midnight he heard old Weemer putting a form under the old Washington hand press. When Greeley came up, old Weemer laid a damp copy of the single sheet *Boomerang* on his desk.

"Reckon that's the idea?" said old Weemer.

Greeley looked at the paper. He read a line—

"COLTON HELPS KID ESCAPE!"

"That's it," said Greeley.

He folded the paper and went down the street to the Wild Horse saloon. He shoved the paper at the bartender, and said, "Show it to Saunders!"

FIVE minutes later, Greeley stood in front of the stone county jail. Greeley knew that Deputy Jim Bunt would be

asleep in the small room back by the cells. He rapped on the door with his gun butt.

Deputy Bunt opened the door, looking out sleepily. He woke up swiftly. The muzzle and sights of Greeley's gun jammed between his eyes.

"Do as I say and don't squawk, an' I ain't funnin'!" rapped out Greeley. "What brains you got belong to Saunders and Huber, an' it'll be no loss if they get scattered around! Don't talk, just walk!"

At the heavy door leading into the *Boomerang* basement, Greeley took Deputy Bunt's bunch of keys.

The door was slammed down and barred. Greeley smiled grimly as he heard Deputy Bunt cursing and stumbling around. Old Weemer was fussing around upstairs, making a racket with the old Washington hand press. There were few if any citizens around to hear the clatter made by the imprisoned Bunt.

Greeley headed back for the stone jail, Bunt's keys in his pocket. He went through the small office and in among the cells. A dim oil lamp was burning and Greeley turned it out suddenly.

"Hiya, kid!" he hailed cautiously.

"What's the matter with that light?" came a thin voice. "That you, Jim? Where've you been? You promised to come back, an' I've been waitin'."

There could be but the one prisoner. It must be the Salt Creek Kid. Yet that voice, which guided Greeley to the cell he sought, also sent a tingling, incredible message along his nerves.

Greeley talked now, imitating as nearly as he could the voice of Deputy Jim Bunt.

"It's me—Jim," he said softly. "Got held up. You're goin' out, you know."

"Goin' out? I didn't know—"

The voice of the Salt Creek Kid was suddenly high and shrill. Greeley fumbled the bunch of Deputy Bunt's keys, holding his breath. It was the Kid's voice that got him. He found the right key and the lock grated.

As the door swung, Greeley said, "Yup, Kid. You're on your way out—"

He didn't finish his deceptive words. Even the time he had been kicked between the eyes by a breachy cow, he hadn't been any more dumfounded than now.

"Oh, Jim' I knowed you'd fix it!"

The Kid's voice tumbled out. Before Greeley could step aside, he was smothered by clinging, soft arms. A swaying, quivering body was fitting its curves to his angular figure.

By reason of his hands reaching aut, Greeley discovered that he was touching warm, very much unclad flesh.

"Jim—oh, Jim!" the Kid whispered, parted lips burning with a kiss that left out all doubt as to why Sheriff John Huber had kept the identity of the mysterious Salt Creek Kid so much a secret.

The bandit killer of the silk mask, the bank and stage robber, was a girl, and one with all the warmth and comfort that a woman could give. Even as he felt his senses slipping and knew it was in the cards to accept what the gods dealt him, Greeley reasoned out the spot that Sheriff Huber had been put upon.

True, he had captured the Salt Creek Kid. But there hadn't been any reelection glory in producing a mere slip of a girl, even if she had been a masked bandit with two guns. And then, there didn't seem any doubt but that she was a nice, two-gun gal of the hills, all eager for some man's love.

So it was apparent that Deputy Jim Bunt had supplied the want for the amazing prisoner. And now Greeley—

THERE are times when any man yields to crazy impulses, and there are times when he must appear to yield with cold calculation. With Greeley, it was about half and half. The girl's mistaken kiss seemed to go right down into his boots.

Evidently she had been ready and waiting for a visit from Jim Bunt. Perhaps there was half a minute when even the thought of Jane Reilly was dimmed, but he had to play the role of Jim Bunt for the moment, so he did what he could—

Then the girl's hot breath was still upon his face. "You made a little mistake," said Greeley. "At that, I'm thinkin' you won't miss Jim Bunt so much. I've been sent by the sheriff an' Saunders, an' we're ridin'."

A soft hand caressed his face. "I'm thinkin' maybe so I can forget Jim Bunt," said the Kid. "An' I knowed Sheriff Huber was turnin' me out tonight for some reason. I'll be ready in a jiffy."

Greeley also knew the reason for turn-

ing out the Salt Creek Kid. It lay in the story now in the *Boomerang* left at the Wild Horse bar. But from here on, Greeley had to use his head fast.

The Salt Creek Kid must know the hide-out of The Cougar. And The Cougar was holding Jane Reilly.

IN THE office outside, Greeley had his first glimpse of the Kid's face. The eyes were deep and burning, and the features were pretty in a hard sort of way. But there was a vicious look around the mouth that made Greeley shudder.

"She'd love a man one minute an' stick a knife in his back the next," was his thought.

He led the way through the darkness to where he had tied two horses. The Salt Creek Kid spoke suddenly.

"Feller, I don't know you, but I sure like your style," she said. "So the sheriff an' Saunders sent you to break me out. I was told they had some deal on, an' I was to git out'n the country."

"Yup," said Greeley. "That's right. I was told to pick up The Cougar, an' I was slipped the info' you was sweet on him."

Greeley was tense now, batting in the dark.

"Yeah," said the girl bandit. "But I ain't so sure," and she was studying Greeley's clean cut face.

"Well, we'll see," said Greeley. "I've gotta take you to The Cougar, but I ain't so sure of my way through this damn' malpais. But I've a message that he's supposed to get."

Greeley was all set for trouble. If he had to make it a killing-showdown, he could do it that way. But the Kid's eyes were softly speculative.

"Good thing you got me to guide you," she said quietly. "The devil himself couldn't find his way to that hide-out in the Saddle Rock."

Greeley breathed easier.

AFTER hours of twisting and turning, the horses came at dawn through a dense, brush-choked clutter of volcanic rocks. It was long past sunrise before Greeley and the Kid drew rein upon a high flat ledge.

By daylight, the Salt Creek Kid could not have deceived many eyes with the way she filled out the torn overalls she was wearing. She had asked for a gun, and Greeley, to avert suspicion, had given her one.

Starting again, they swerved around a shoulder. A black stubbled guard suddenly stepped out, rifle in hand. Then he grinned at the Salt Creek Kid.

"Damn' nigh drilled yuh, 'fore I saw it was you, Kid!" he said. "Who's this jasper?"

"Friend o' Sheriff Huber's with a message for The Cougar," said the Kid. "He broke me out'n jail."

"Up at the cabin," motioned the sentry.

They rode on, and a rough shake cabin with a lean-to stable came into view. Just as it did, a high-pitched scream broke on the morning air.

"Don't! You promised! You said if Greeley would do as you said—oh, you beast!"

That was Jane Reilly's clear voice. Greeley forgot the Kid, and everything else. He sent his gelding forward with digging spurs. He was just in time to see Jane Reilly's slim figure burst from the doorway of the shake cabin. A huge figure hurtled after her.

Jane cried out, stumbled, and fell. The man cursed loudly. He threw himself forward. In the avid desire and rage of the moment, he missed seeing Greeley bearing down upon him.

Jane was fighting with white hands. The man beat them down, seized her roughly to him.

Greeley was seeking a clean target as he rolled from his horse. It seemed impossible to miss wounding Jane Reilly. He had teetotally forgotten the Salt Creek Kid. A six-gun blasted from one side and parted Greeley's hair the wrong way.

Greeley had a glimpse of the powder-smoke. Above it he saw the hatchet face of Sheriff John Huber. Jane was still seeking to free herself from the brute who had pinned her to the ground.

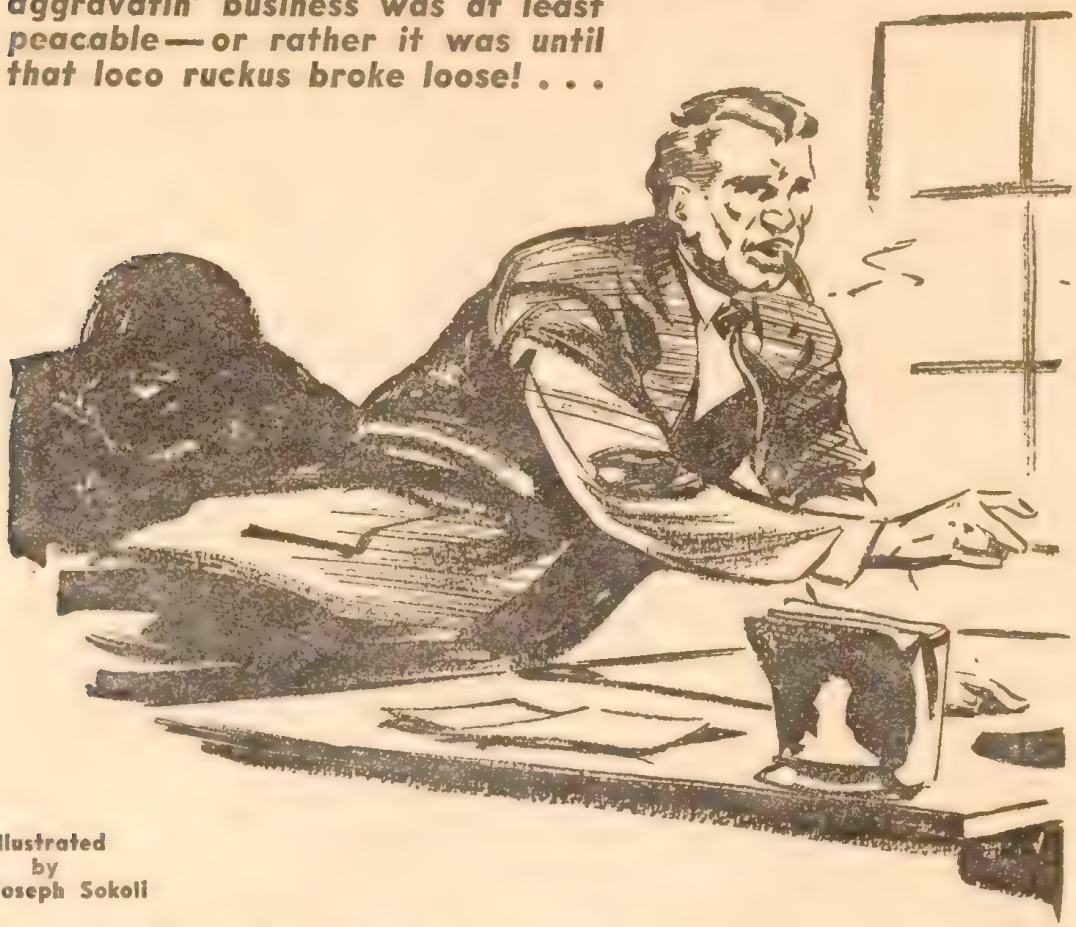
Greeley threw himself toward the pair, when he heard a clear, hard voice ring out.

"Cross me up, would yuh, Cougar, t' elect your pet sheriff?" slapped out the Salt Creek Kid. "An' then try some two-timin' all on your own, huh?"

The big man with Jane, called The

(*Continued on page* 88)

This dude-wrangler name of Joe Lace didn't have much affection for his profession, but on the other hand he was a heap tired of gunfighting and killing, so this aggravatin' business was at least peacable—or rather it was until that loco ruckus broke loose! . . .



Illustrated by Joseph Sokoli

ROUGH-PLAYIN' HOMBRE

By RANDOLPH BARR

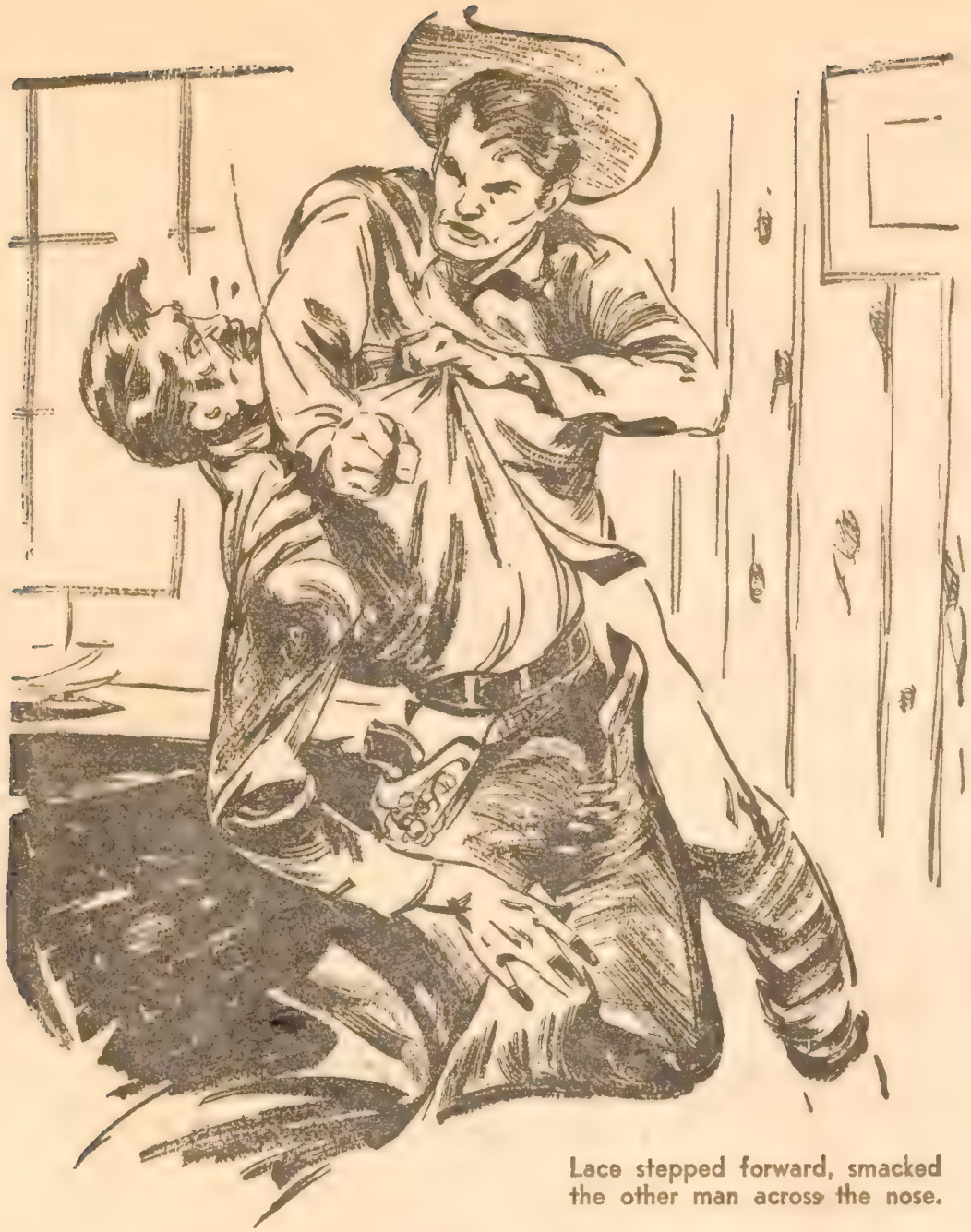
THE Red Roadster blocked the narrow road that ran up to Rustler's Roost. Joe Lace reined up, frowning, looking for the owner of this expensive hunk of rolling stock. All around him were mountains, and the silences of mountains; a silence now disturbed by sobs, unmistakably feminine, coming from beyond a bracken brake to his right.

Lace swore resignedly as he lifted his long, broad-shouldered shape from the saddle. The antics of the dudes who came to Rustler's Roost would drive a *real* cowhand, like Lace, plumb loco.

He skirted the brake and stopped short, his breath exploding. The tall, blonde girl, still sobbing, stood with the skirt of her expensive traveling suit pulled above her knees. She whirled, making an immediate appeal: "Huh-help me. Please."

Lace saw the cause of her cries. "Be right back," he mumbled, turning toward the road and his horse. He returned with antiseptic and a pair of pliers.

"Do 'er in a hurry—that's best," he croaked, and started yanking quills.



Lace stepped forward, smacked the other man across the nose.

"How'd you happen to run across a quill pig? I mean, a porcupine?"

"The nuh-nasty animal crossed in front of my car and I stopped to see what it was. I followed it, and stumbled and partly fell on it. Y-you see, I'm headed for Rustler's Roost Dude Ranch. I—Ohhh!"

Lace was yanking quills out of her right arm. Now, he knew who this girl must be; Elspeth Vaughn, heiress to the Vaughn Vitamin Pill millions. Hell, the whole ranch had been expecting her for a week.

"You're Miss Vaughn," he said, picking up the antiseptic bottle.

"Yes. And you?"

"Joe Lace. Dude Wrang—I mean, guide. Rustler's Roost." He spoke the words with evident distaste. "Here, Miss Vaughn. You'll have to daub this stuff on the spots where I pulled quills; and see there's none of them busted off an' still stickin'."

She lowered long lashes. "I—you better do it," she muttered.

Tall, willowy, she waited, eyes demurely downcast. Lace set his teeth, his breath whistling audibly, as he applied the glass dauber.

Moisture beaded his forehead when he'd finished. He stepped back, still unable to tear his fascinated gaze from her.

SHE STEPPED to him, picking at the knot of his neckerchief. Her head tilted, she pursed her lips close to his, and her eyes invited him. He caught her in his arms and crushed her against him.

"No!" Lace croaked, stepping back. He had to put an end to this. He swore, when he'd taken this dude wrangling job by force instead of choice, he'd not be a damned fool and become involved in a Summer's romance with any rich girl; avowed he'd be dragged into no marriage, either, passing fancy for a wealthy woman, to be hauled East, worn like a bangle on a charm bracelet, then cast aside.

Lace shook his head. "This ain't the right rusty we're cuttin'," he declared.

"You aren't fair," she muttered sullenly. "Perhaps, though, you're right. We'll have a lot to look forward to."

"Not if I can help it!" Lace exclaimed, after he'd escorted her to the roadster and watched her drive on up toward the ranch. He took a bottle of whiskey from a saddle pocket and had a double-in-one, deciding, "This stuff's for emergency only —an' I reckon this is an emergency."

Back at the ranch, Lace gave Sam Taylor the mail. Sam, a fat, perspiring little man, shook his head. "This Miss Vaughn has arrived," he announced. "Everybody turned out in his best. But you, Lace, you won't wear a fancy pistol, or chaps, or nothin'. If you wasn't the best hand on the place—"

"This gun—" Lace rested his hand on the plain walnut butt of a worn .45— "ain't for show." A metallic note crept into his voice. "I wrangle dudes, not duds. Leave that to the others, like Swift Farn."

"And what's wrong with Farn?" Sam seemed concerned.

"His loud talk, his flashy, put-on airs don't fit, that's all. He's deeper than he wants folks to think. I don't like him, you know it, an' he knows it or I wouldn't be talkin' like this now. Me, I wouldn't have him around; reminds me of a wolf in a bunch of woolly lambs."

Sam shrugged and started sorting out the mail. Lace went out, crossed the wide area between rows of cabins and passed the bar and recreation hall. Elspeth Vaughn, glass in hand, waved from the doorway. Lace nodded curtly and hurried on to the wranglers' bunkhouse.

LACE'S partner, bald, old Egg Smith, tossed aside a catalogue he was thumbing and peered at Lace over his steel-rimmed specs. "Y'see the red fire waggin' an' what come with?" he inquired. "Damn' nigh all these would-be, mail-order cowhands is chasin' the fire a'ready." He looked over at the tall, thick-shouldered, dark man shaving before a mirror on the opposite wall.

This man, Swift Farn, razored another hair of his small moustache meticulously, then turned, lips curling beneath his beaked nose. "Are you throwing that at me, Noah?" he sneered. "If you are, cut it out of the herd. Any time I want to rope a rich girl, I won't have to chase her. Me, I'm advising you to hobble your blab."

He looked at Lace, defying him to take this up. Lace's eyes met Farn's. It was odd, Lace reasoned: He and Farn had been enemies since they'd set eyes on each other at the start of the season. And Farn, for some reason or other, had gone out of his way to be difficult. Too, there was a matter of Farn's rifle going off while he was cleaning it, the bullet damned near hitting Lace; there had been a cut saddle cinch, a mountain rattlesnake in a pack bag . . . For no reason at all that Lace could quite figure—yet.

Farn's stare became a scowl and he turned away from Lace's probing gaze. Farn finished his primping, adjusted his shrieking-hued scarf, topped himself with an enormous cream-colored beaver and left the bunkhouse.

"I don't savvy that feller, an' don't care none for him," Egg grumbled. "He don't fit in. Damn 'er to hell, nohow! Wasn't for them damn buskies, Big Crass an' Nig Arpp, we wouldn't be over this side the mountaings, wranglin' dudes an' rubbin' again' things like Farn. As 'tis, we gotta rustle a stake to stock us steak on the hoof."

"Comes the time I ever see Crass an' Arpp." Lace's voice was terribly unemotional. He swore, then, and knocked out his pipe as the horn of the ranch's station wagon sounded in the distance. Egg chuckled. "Glad I'm just a packer," he allowed. "*I* don't have to go out an' show off for no new crop of dudes."

Dudes already on the ground, the Monkey-Sawbuck wranglers in all their Bill-Show regalia, were at the recreation hall to meet the new-comers. They piled out, the usual squealing, grunting bunch, yelling first-off for the whereabouts of the bar. Lace stood back, a figure apart. Perhaps that was why the last passenger off the wagon paused, her grave attention singling him out.

She was small, dark-haired, with a rosebud mouth and deep, dark eyes. She breathed deeply of the fir-scented air.

Lace, somehow, gathered the idea that here was another wealthy one, who took a different trail from Elspeth Vaughn: A quiet, unassuming road. Yet he couldn't tear his gaze away from her. He saw a little rise of color to her cheeks.

Swift Farn stepped up to her, bowed, swept off his sombrero. "Reckon ah's right glad to welcome yuh tuh Rustluh's Roost, maaa'aam," he began.

She stared at the toes of his expensive, gaudy boots, and her gaze scorched him from there upward. "I don't think the surroundings require all the theatrical trimmings, thank you," she sniffed.

Lace's chuckle was audible. Farn's ears reddened, he glared at Lace, jammed on his hat and walked away. The girl smiled at Lace. "If you'd help me find my cabin," she suggested.

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her it wasn't his duty to toe luggage or find cabins, as he again reminded himself that rich girls were out as far as he was in. He heard himself saying, "Be glad to, Miss—"

"Blynn," she supplied. "Betts Blynn, Mr.—"

"Joe Lace."

HE went into the little receiving office, got her cabin number, returned and picked up her expensive, pigskin luggage. As they walked away, two people glared after them. One, Elspeth Vaughn; two, Swift Farn. There wasn't anything Farn could do; Elspeth, however, could. She forthwith got hold of Sam Taylor. . . .

Lace and Egg were alone in the bunkhouse that night when Sam came in. Sam waved despairingly. "Why ain't you over in the hall, dancing with the dudes?" he demanded of Lace.

"Ain't there enough jam there now?" Lace growled.

"That ain't it. Seems like this Miss Vaughn singled you out as a real cowhand and wants you over there. Not only that, she wants in the party you're taking up to Elk Meadows, day after tomorrow."

Lace sighed heavily, got up and slouched to the hall. A radio blared dance music, and Elspeth came away from the bar as Lace entered. It wasn't accident that Swift Farn came up. He made his bow and gave Lace a sly, provoking look. Elspeth sensed the enmity between these two, and something told her she was going to have a very good vacation here, indeed!

"I've this dance with Joe," she said to Farn. "Later." Her tone was calculated to make Lace jealous, and it angered her, the indifferent way he took her into his arms and swung away. She stopped as they came to the door, tugged at his arm and murmured, "Let's walk."

Lace was on the point of refusal. He looked across the room and saw Sam Taylor was watching. After all, he reflected, he and Egg needed the money this Summer's work would bring. He stepped out into the night, pale with a risen half-moon.

It was Elspeth who led the way beyond the rows of buildings, stopping beneath tall firs, gathering her skirt and sitting down on a fallen tree. Lace, uncomfortable, determined to be uncompromising, remained standing.

"Sit down," she commanded. "After all—"

"I'm paid to amuse the guests," he growled.

She rose swiftly. "You are," she snapped. She faced him, then leaned heavily against him. "Joe, dear," she crooned. "Don't you remember?" Her arms went around his neck.

"Dammit, I am rememberin'!" he griped, and his arms went around her against his will. After a long time, she

stepped away from him. There was laughter and triumph in her voice.

"Good-night, darling," she said, and faded back toward the recreation hall. Lace remained by the fallen tree. He packed his pipe but didn't light it.

"Damn these dudes!" he exploded viciously, then fell quiet, staring at the trunk of a fir a few yards away. He wasn't certain, but he thought he'd glimpsed a flash of white, of movement there. He pocketed his pipe as he strode to the tree.

Betts Blynn stepped from behind it.

"I'm sorry," she said stiffly. "I was taking a walk, and had no intention of eavesdropping, or spying. I was hoping you would go away, not knowing I—I was an audience."

"Listen, Miss Blynn," Lace begged, wondering why he was so anxious she should understand. "I couldn't help myself. I—I guess you heard her talkin' about the porcupine, an'—"

"It must have been amusing," she snapped with seemingly unwonted asperity. "But why do you damn the dudes, then—"

"It's a story I'd like to tell you," he offered hopefully.

"Oh, I want none of your stories you—you quill puller!" she cried, and started to run past him. Needles lay thick and slippery beneath the trees. She slipped and pitched into Lace's arms. His heart raced, his head spun, and he knew a dizziness of a sort a dozen Elspeth Vaughn's could not have produced. She clung to him, then straightened, looking up. Lace gazed down at her upturned face. Her lips parted, her breath came jerkily.

SHE didn't draw away when he slowly, gently lowered his head and kissed her. Her lips trembled against his, answered briefly. He released her and stepped back, his chest rising and falling heavily.

"Now, damn me with the rest," she sobbed, turning away. As she scurried off, he heard her choke, "And it had to be you!" but he didn't understand. . . .

Lace got himself and Egg away from the ranch next morning by insisting they take the job of rounding up some saddle and pack stock drifting on the range. Egg was silent until they reached the edge of the "Big Burn," a mountain slope three miles east of the ranch. Years before, a forest fire had stripped the slope and now it was a tangled mess of underbrush and second growth, dotted by charred stumps and dead, burned trunks rising like monuments to the dead timber. This scene of an old fire seemed to remind Egg: "Runnin' away from the fire-waggin' driver?" he inquired.

"From the whole damn' mess; 'specially that two-bit rodeo they're puttin' on today," Lace griped. "Egg, the more I have to take here, the more I'm addin' up to the debt Big Crass and Nig Arpp owe us. I—Huh?"

He rose in his stirrups, looking down the jungled slope, a frown furrowing his brow. He sat back, then. "Guess I'm seein' things," he grouched. "I could've sworn I saw a ranny on a high bay brawnk flash past that li'l openin' 'way down there." He got his glasses from the saddle pocket and trained them down the slope.

"Light bay, eh?" Egg grunted. "Nig Arpp favored thet light bay geldin' of his. Reckon *you* are seein' things, Lace. Ain't nothin' down there in thet burn, an' if there was, wouldn't be Arpp or Crass. They've skunt outa the country long ago."

"Guess you're right, partly." Lace pocketed the field glasses. "As far as them two skunks bein' out of the country, I ain't so sure. Too many lawmen on the look for them for them to travel much; an' you want to remember, they was plumb busted."

They rode on, spending the rest of the day rounding up a few head of saddle stock from grassy mountain parks, taking their time so they wouldn't hit the ranch until well after nightfall. Sam had left word for Lace to come to his office. Lace drifted in only after he'd taken his own sweet time eating his supper.

"You act like you was too good to mix with the guests," Sam griped when Lace faced him. "Miss Vaughn's been ranting around. She hinted she could find another dude ranch, the wrangler she wanted here wasn't on the job. Maybe you understand me?"

Lace lifted his shoulders. "A'right," he grunted. "That all?"

"Nope. There'll be five in the party you're taking to Elk Meadows: Miss Vaughn, Miss Blynn, that fat lady, Mrs. Tolliver, the skinny old maid, Miss Yates,

and that grouchy guy, Kurge. I'm sending Swift Farn along with you."

"What? What the hell?" Lace exploded.

"Miss Vaughn asked for him. That's that."

"An' who's runnin' things?" Lace demanded grimly. Sam looked at him, and sensed that Lace was on the verge of spooling his roll.

Elspeth Vaught confronted the bewildered Sam Taylor. "I demand you make Joe Lace come to me and apologize!" she said.

"Oh, you are," the dude ranch owner groaned.

"Be sure Farn understands that," Lace warned as he went out.

LACE and Egg, as packer for the outfit, were up long before daylight next morning, and had the camp equipment slung and hitched by the time their charges had eaten breakfast and filed out of the lodge in the grim, determined manner of those who pay for punishment they dislike but are bound to take.

Farn was the last to show up. He rode up from the saddle corral, resplendant in batwing chaps and other trappings, his guitar in a case tied behind the cantle. Egg groaned. "We gotta stand him an'

thet damn' whang-trough too," he groaned at Lace.

Farn made a grandstand pull-up and smiled at Elspeth, who sported tailored waist overalls, a loud silk shirt and expensive J. B. He nodded at Betts Blynn. She, in plain levis and flannel shirt, merely stared through him. She turned, caught Lace's smile. A tightening of her lips was the only answer.

"Well, I guess we're all ready. So let's get going," Farn announced.

"When I give the order!" Lace snapped.

"I wish you'd give him an order to keep still. The sight of him brings up my dyspepsia," the gaunt, sour man, Kurge, snarled.

Farn rose in his stirrups and bowed to Lace. "As you wish, *boss!*" he mocked, savagery underlying his tone.

Elspeth reined over beside Farn, an aggravating quirk on her lips as she looked sideways at Lace. "Let's us go ahead," she urged, and put her horse into motion. Lace was about to remind her the party should stick together as he commanded. He closed his lips. She—damn her!—was the great heiress, and he was a hired hand. Let it ride like that.

Betts Blynn, seeing his trap-mouthed expression, mistook his anger for jealousy. Her chin went up a notch.

Lace dropped back, helping Egg get the packhorses strung out and going. Mrs. Tolliver, bulging over her saddle, and the skinny Yates woman paired off to gossip about Elspeth and Farn. Kurge rode in beside Lace when the latter pulled up ahead of the lead packhorse, passing Betts Blynn. She rode well to her hull, her stirrups long, range-fashion, and she didn't "ride the reins" or "post Park Avenue" in a western saddle, Lace noted.

Kurge shook a pill out of a box and swallowed it. "Not half as bitter as that damned Farn," he groused at Lace. "He leading this outfit?"

"I'm roddin' it—or supposed to be," Lace answered.

"Uh-huh. You mean that hare-brained pill fortune is running this. Hell!" Kurge threw the box of pills away. He looked back where Betts had fallen in beside Egg. "There's a girl," Kurge said. "Got the air, the looks of having money. But you don't see her putting on. Hen party, this is. I came here to enjoy myself, and get a hen party. Pah!"

Lace looked at Kurge and a grin broke on his face. "You are enjoyin' yourself," he declared. "You didn't have somethin' to gripe about, you wouldn't be happy."

Kurge blinked, grunted, made a dry grimace perhaps aimed at being a smile. "Bigod, I like you!" he swore.

THE whole bunch were too tired to do anything but eat and roll in when camp was pitched that night; for which Lace was thankful. He wasn't thankful, however, next day, when Elspeth turned her attentions from Farn to himself, and Farn persisted in trying to ride with Betts, until she dropped back wih Egg again.

Lace was glad when they reached campsight at Elk Meadows an hour before sundown. The small meadow lay on a bench below an overhang of rimrock. A mountain stream leaped off into space and disappeared in spray behind a copse of quaking aspen. There was a broad, slowly-edying aspen. There was a broad, slowly-eddy- Farn and Elspeth and the others pointed trout rods and headed for the pool.

Betts remained behind, helping Egg start supper while Lace hobbled the stock. The girl showed her familiarity with a dutch oven and a spider, taking over while Egg helped Lace start putting up the tents.

"There," Egg announced, "is a gal thet—"

"I don't give a damn," Lace growled.

"Hell, you're worse than Kurge!" Egg griped. "Thet durn fire-waggin' gal's—"

"Egg, you mention her again, I'll—I'll —Oh, let it ride!"

Supper over, the fire built up, the group ringed it. Farn got his guitar and started taking it from the case. Kurge groaned, "Can't we have peace? Somebody tell a ghost story, or something."

Farn glared angrily.

"Yes," Mrs. Tolliver put in. "But not a ghost story. Let's hear something about the wild west. Did anything ever happen here?"

"You might ask our *boss,*" Farn sneered. "I hear tell he's killed a couple of men in his time. For rewards. Bounty-hunting, I think it's called."

Elspeth squealed with the fat and thin

woman. She moved over and touched Lace, exaggerating a shiver. "Tell us, Joe, dear," she begged.

Lace's right hand had instinctively gone to his hip, bare, since he'd hung his gun on the horn of his saddle which swung from a nearby tree. He looked across the fire. Betts Blynn's face registered dull disgust. That expression filled Lace with an unexplainable defiance.

"Sure," Lace responded. "Bounty-hunting, on polecats. You know the details, Farn?"

"How would I?" Farn lifted his shoulders. "I only know why you say *you're* working for this outfit."

"I'll tell you," Lace said. "Y'see, folks, Egg and me own an outfit the other side of the mountains, about a hundred miles from Rustler's Roost. I was a deputy sheriff, too. There was a bunch robbed a bank, shot a teller, deliberately killed an ol' livery stable hostler in their getaway. They fooled a posse—all but one man. He happened to be me. Anyhow, I got two of them cornered, an', I killed them!"

Lace stared across at Betts.

"Those two had the money from the bank holdup," Lace went on. "A few days later, the two that'd escaped come out of their hole. Egg an' me had built up a li'l herd of about seventy head. Those two devils run ever' head over a rim into a canyon. Wiped us out. Big Crass an' Nig Arpp is their names."

Lace fashioned a grisly smile for Farn.

"Y'ever hear of them?" he inquired softly.

"Never did. Never expect to. Anybody can tell 'em tall and windy." Farn yawned elaborately.

"Nice way of callin' a man a liar," Lace laughed harshly.

"Yeah?" Farn picked up his guitar. Kurge cussed and took to his tent. Elspeth drew back, scowling at Lace.

"I understand it's an insult to be called a liar?" she muttered, malicious intent behind the expression.

"It'd be nice," Lace drawled, "if you could go back East an' claim two men fought . . . an' you could claim it was over you," Lace grunted, then got up and moved away. He walked over and sat by himself, nursing his pipe, wondering more and more about Swift Farn.

He heard Elspeth say, "That's enough, Swift," in an imperious tone, and looked toward the fire. He didn't like the look on Farn's face; Farn wasn't a ranny who'd like being ordered by a woman, no matter who she was. Farn shrugged, got up and drifted toward the pup tent he shared alone.

THE camp turned in. Lace, his bedroll spread under a tree near the hobbled horses in case a mountain lion should come nosing around, lay and stared at the stars. He tried to compose himself to sleep, and failed. He swore silently, sat up and donned his boots, rose and went silently out of camp, heading for the pool.

He sat down on the bank, his back to a tree, watching the moonlight on the water's surface, dry pipe in his mouth. He stiffened, then, as a shadowy figure moved up to the pool, not ten yards away. Lace held motionless, watching the dim outline under a tree's moonlight-shot shadow. She moved into the moonlight's path, then, stepping to the edge of the pool, testing the water's temperature.

"Wait!" Lace croaked, rising suddenly.

Betts Blynn choked a little cry and stepped back. Lace loomed above her. "We're even," he said, "on the eavesdroppin' an' spyin' by mistake."

Her chin went up. "You might have sat there and waited until I—I" she lowered her gaze.

Seemingly over before it began, he grabbed her, held her against him, kissed her and let her go.

"I'm sorry, an' I won't do that again," he croaked, and strode rapidly toward the camp, muttering to himself, "If she didn't have money—"

"We start back tomorrow," Lace told Egg the next morning. "An' when we get back, I'm quittin'!"

"Thet damn' fire-waggin'," Egg mumbled to himself. "A'right," he said aloud to Lace. "I got about all I can stummick, too."

Betts studiously avoided Lace on the return trip to the ranch, and Lace, just as studiously, avoided Elspeth. They hit home ranch late in the evening and Lace went straight to Sam Taylor's office.

"I'm quittin'," he announced. "An' never mind why. Egg an' me'll be draggin'

out in the mornin'. That's final, an' no arguin'."

Half an hour later, Elspeth Vaughn confronted the bewildered Sam Taylor. "I demand you make Joe Lace come to me and apologize!" she snapped. Before Sam could ask what for and why, or tell her Lace had already quit, Elspeth marched out of his office.

Taylor called Swift Farn in. "What," he demanded, "happened on this trip? Lace and Smith have quit. They're leaving in the morning. It'll be up to you to handle his party tomorrow."

"I guess Lace is sored up because the girl wouldn't fall for him," Farn said. "I'll be ready to take his bunch." If there was a peculiar glint in his eyes, hidden meaning in his words, Taylor didn't notice. Farn left the office. Unnoticed, he went to the saddle corral, saddled a horse and rode off in the early darkness, heading in the direction of Big Burn. . . .

THE rising sun, next morning, shone on the backs of Lace and Egg. Egg rode in silence, respecting Lace's somewhat forlorn attitude. Lace rode resolutely, refusing to look back as they wound their way higher into the mountains. Two hours steady going and Lace drew rein, began filling his pipe.

"Joe, I wouldn't let thet damn firewaggin'—" Egg began.

"Who? The Vaughn woman? Hell, Egg, who'd care about that spoiled female fool? It's Betts Blynn I'm thinkin' about. I—hell, I can picture her in a li'l ranch house, an apron on . . . Aw, I'm a fool. Rich girl like her—"

"Rich?" Egg echoed. "Judas Priest, Lace, she ain't rich! You recollect, when we was pitchin' camp in Elk Medder, I started to tell you about Betts Blynn, an' you shut me up, sayin' you never give a damn? I started to tell you then. Y'see, Betts an' me talked a lot together. She was borned on a li'l spread in Kansas, Lace. Lost her folks an' went to work in a store. Been savin' for a long time for this here vacation. She never tried to make nobody think she was rich. Hey? Where you goin'?"

"Rustler's Roost!" Lace yodeled, turning his horse and giving it the steel.

FAT Mrs. Tolliver and thin Miss Yates were too saddle sore and weary to make a ride next day—which was as Swift Farn had figured. Betts Blynn and Elspeth Vaughn were mounted and waiting when Farn hauled up and made the announcement. Kurge came out of his acbin.

"Where's Lace?" he demanded.

"Lace and his partner quit and pulled out early this morning," Farn grunted, eyeing Kurge mockingly.

"He—quit and left?" Betts' voice was hollow, her expression stricken.

"Quit!" Elspeth snorted. "Fired, you mean. I told Mr. Taylor Joe Lace would have to apologize for being rude to me."

"You—heifer!" Kurge rasped. He turned on his heel and went back into his cabin. Elspeth looked at Betts, as though waiting for her, too, to give up this ride and leave her alone with Farn. Betts' little chin went up.

"Shall we go ahead?" she inquired.

Elspeth looked daggers at her as Farn nodded, swung to his saddle and headed eastward, in the direction of Big Burn.

It lacked an hour before noon when Swift Farn, clutching the saddlehorn and swaying perilously, rode up to the office, slid to the ground and staggered in, calling Sam Taylor's name.

"What? What's the matter?" Taylor croaked as Farn slumped into a chair. Farn opened his mouth. The door was thrust open and Lace strode in.

"Sam, I come back to—" he began, and then his eyes fell on Farn. Taylor motioned at Lace and shook his head. Farn's features tightened at sight of Lace, he sucked in a windy breath.

"The girls. Miss Vaughn and Blynn," he groaned, pulling off his hat. "We were riding a trail east of here when two masked men jumped us. They got the drop on me. They said they aimed to hold the girls, somewhere up in the mountains, until ransom was paid. They said they'd get word to you, later, how to pay it. I went for my gun, anyhow, and the rapped me with a gunbarrel and knocked me out. When I come to, they were gone!"

He groaned again and rubbed his head. Sam Taylor groaned louder than Farn.

"This'll ruin me!" he cried. "Somebody! Send for the sheriff, the G-men, the ——"

"They warned against that," Farn croaked.

Lace stepped forward, smacked the back of his hand across Farn's nose, reached down and flipped Farn's gun out of the holster. He rapped Farn again, rubbed his knee against Farn's chest and grabbed his head. He stepped back before the amazed Taylor really realized what had happened. Farn came to his feet, blood streaming from his nose.

"First place," Lace snarled savagely, "that ain't nothin' but a li'l 'pump' knot on your head. You wasn't knocked out. Second place, no kidnaper'd leave you your gun, or your horse, so you could get back here so soon. Third place, Farn, I b'lieve I know, now, about that rifle goin' off, the snake in the pack box, an' other li'l things. Now, huddem you, give up head! Where's them girls, an' who's got 'em!"

"You're crazy!" Farn snarled. "I bet you and Egg—"

"Talk!" Lace roared, and his fist made a soggy sound on Swift Farn's nose. Farn rocked on his heels, struck back wildly, then went over Sam Taylor's desk, his left ear smashed to a pulp.

Dudes and hired help came running, flocking outside the office door.

"Stay back," Taylor begged, yapping through the screen. "This—this is awful." He winced as another blow sounded. "Egg, keep them back," he begged.

"A'right," the group heard Joe Lace rasp. "Damn you, talk!"

"Stop!" Farn cried thickly. "Don't, you're breaking—my—arm! *I'll talk!* The girls are in a camp down in the underbrush in the burn. Turn south at that lightning struck pine and ride straight in, about half a mile. Big Crass and Nig Arpp've got them. I use to be in Arpp's bunch and they got hold of me when you put them on the run the other side the mountains. It was our aim to wait until the dudes had enough money and jewelry in the safe here, then rob it, to get enough to get them out of the country. I been taking them grub all the time. Hadn't been for you, damn you—"

"Yeah! That's why you tried to kill me!" Lace spat. "So as soon as I pulled out, you shifted plans, an' aimed at bigger game than robbin' Sam's safe. You damn' ——"

He thrust Farn away, hit him viciously, hit him again as he started floorward. "Lock him up an' guard him, Sam," he ordered, then slammed outside.

"Come on, Egg," he barked. "Here's where we collect enough bounty to stock our ranch again. An' don't forget, the rewards is alive—or dead!"

BETTS BLYNN struggled and clawed at the dark face of the half-breed, Nig Arpp, despite the fact her wrists were bound. He swore, dragged her from the saddle and shoved her into the brush hut hidden in the tangled second growth. Elspeth, sniffling, scared speechless for once, already sat on a blanket in the crude, open-sided shelter.

Betts stumbled, went to her knees, struggled to her feet and faced Arpp. Big Crass, a mountainous brute of a man with a flat, ape-like face, came up. Betts saw the futility of further fighting.

"You fools!" she cried. "I haven't a penny to pay ransom with. I work in a store. Earn my own living."

Arpp and Crass exchanged sharp glances.

"We'll wait an' see," Crass rumbled. "You," he thundered at Elspeth. "Tell us you can't pay?"

"I can," she quavered. "Let me go and—"

"Sure, we'll let you go," Arpp hooted. "When we've been paid. Meantime, take 'er easy. Look. Me an' Crass is pritty lonesome, an' we ain't such bad company." He grinned at Crass and the look that passed between them showed the workings of their minds. Arpp approached Elspeth, pulled her to her feet.

"We got to send somethin' to the ranch to show we're the ones holdin' you," Crass mumbled hoarsely. "Reckon your rings, now, will be about the ticket." He mopped his moist forehead. "I'll untie your paws, honey. Crass, you handle the wildcat, there."

Betts drew as far into the corner as she could. Crass was watching Elspeth.

"All right." Crass turned to Betts. She held out her hands. When he untied her wrists, Betts ducked, tried to run past him.

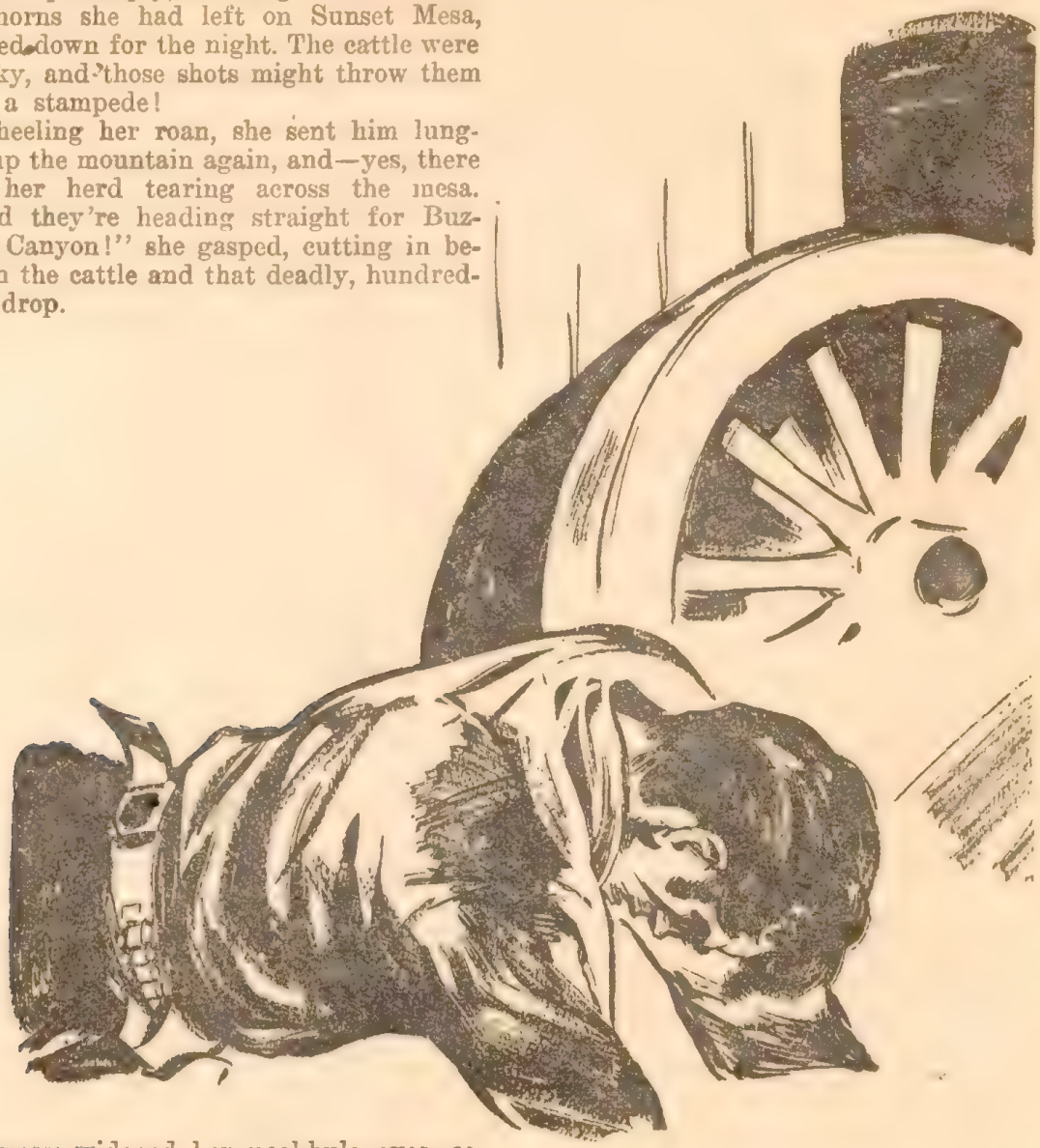
(*Continued on page* 90)

OUTLAW HORSE

By
JOE McCOY

A BLAST of gun-fire rolled sullenly through the mountain wilderness, shattering the evening silence. In a rock-studded gully, Olga Jansen jerked her mount up sharply, thinking of the herd of longhorns she had left on Sunset Mesa, bedded down for the night. The cattle were spooky, and those shots might throw them into a stampede!

Wheeling her roan, she sent him lunging up the mountain again, and—yes, there was her herd tearing across the mesa. "And they're heading straight for Buzzard Canyon!" she gasped, cutting in between the cattle and that deadly, hundred-foot drop.



Dismay widened her pool-bule eyes, as she saw another rider flanking the herd. He was coming on at a terrific clip, and she thought, "if that cowboy is deliberately stampeding my cattle—" But, no—his six-gun barked, swerving the leaders. Now they were running parallel with the canyon, but dangerously near it. With her hair flying behind her in a golden stream, Olga urged her horse on.

There was no time for words, as man and girl raced along that perilous rim; so close that their horses' hoofs sent a rattling shower of sand into the depths below.

She screamed: "Stop! Stop—you murderer!" For Harmon was lying there on the ground, unable to fight back.

Illustrated by Joseph Sokoll

They were of tough and unbending frontier stuff, both Harmon and the girl—but no more so than the proud-spirited animal which must side them in this battle!

Olga was riding furiously, recklessly. With death behind her and in front, she wheeled her big roan, seemingly in a dozen places at once, her quirt lashing out at the crazed longhorns.

The cowboy's gun continued to bark. And after minutes that seemed like hours to Olga, the thundering herd had passed the danger spot. But it took more furious riding before they were finally milling safely.

Then the stranger pulled his heaving sorrel up, and faced the girl in faded overalls and scuffed boots, whose fair tanned face was framed in red-gold hair that hinted of impulsiveness and a dash of temper; whose breast was now almost uncontrollably agitated with the forced exertion for her breathing.

"I'm Dan Harmon, of the Flying U," he told her. His dark eyes were warm with admiration as they took in the full, lithe length of her gorgeous figure, so appealingly outlined in her range clothes. He smiled as he added, "You sure know how to ride, miss!"

IN spite of floppy Stetson and worn batwing chaps, he carried himself with a reckless dash. Olga thrilled to the clean,

lean strength of him, and her heart felt a quickened beat send warm blood racing through her body. "I knew how to ride before I could walk," she said, in a sweetly husky voice, her face flushed, but her eyes holding his steadily. "I don't know how to thank you. Something has been making my cattle spooky—"

"Somebody, you mean," he interrupted. "I saw a couple of Rocking M rannies charging into them with a blast of gunfire—and had the pleasure of winging one of the buzzards."

"But Sunset Mesa is free range!" she cried.

"Sure," he agreed. "But you see what happens when anyone but Tug Bullard tries to run cattle on it."

"Then I don't know what we'll do for water!" she said. "My father, Nord Jansen, bought the Grama Sink ranch last week. And right away our creek went dry."

"Probably dynamited up in the hills," he said grimly. "Diverting streams, poisoning water holes, and stampeding cattle is Tug Ballard's way of hogging Sagishaw County. Better drive your herd back to the Sink. There's a good water hole north of the valley, and I'll haze 'em over there tomorrow."

"But that water hole is fenced," she objected.

Harmon's head, with its battered Stetson, lifted defiantly. "Bullard has no legal right to it! And if he tries to stop me—!" He broke off, gave her a reassuring smile. "Let me help you get the herd down, miss."

With that strange, new thrill tugging at her heart, Olga agreed. It seemed to her that the cattle were too docile, that the drive to the Sink much too short.

But in that short time, she learned many things about this strange cowboy. His set, squared chin bespoke a stubbornness that meant trouble for anyone who crossed him, Tug Bullard for instance, but his eyes could change so quickly, as he looked at her, from steel to warm, thrilling pools. And as she watched him, riding beside her, so cool, so self-assured, she could not stem the flush that came to her face, nor the pulsating of her breast. He was doing things to her inside, yet he made no effort to bring their acquaintanceship past the spirit of neighborliness.

But inside his lean, strong frame, like thoughts and like impulses were upsetting the ordinarily even tenor of his mind. He was appreciative of Olga's ability to ride, to do a man's work, if necessary on the range. But his eyes had a warmer appreciation of the feminine qualities and charm that so temptingly rode beside him.

He was glad that she could not see the turmoil within his heart, not realize that her lush, straight figure in the saddle was making his blood race, the pulse of his heart a maddening tempo. He realized as he insisted upon going home with her, that his wish was dictated more by a desire, a fervent, almost passionate hope, to know her better, to talk to her, watch the fluent, tantalizing movement of her body as she rode, as she walked, as she talked with him.

THEY were lingering near the cabin door, when a voice broke the reverie of their thoughts. "Is that you, Olga?" the voice cried, as for a moment they were silent, eyes held by mutual appreciation. "What happened? Are the cattle—?"

"They're safe. I'll be right in," Olga called. Still, invisible bonds seemed to hold her beside the cowboy with the midnight hair and flashing smile. "A horse fell on dad and broke his leg," she explained. "We've had nothing but trouble!"

"It's tough when everything goes against you. But I'll help you all I can, miss." His voice was like a caress.

"Thanks, and—please call me Olga," she said softly, her tawny lashed eyes like deep blue pools. He took a step toward her and somehow his hand touched hers. "Olga—you're sweet," he whispered. "Lovely as a flower! I wish—"

He got no farther. Without knowing, or caring, how it happened, she was in his arms. Every fiber of her being responded to the yearning hunger of that embrace. And then their lips met, softly at first, then eagerly.

And just as suddenly as they had come together, so abruptly their arms dropped from each other. Dan Rarmon was the first to break the magnetic chain that held them. He turned to his ground-hitched sorrel and said huskily, "I'll come for the cattle in the morning."

Dreamy-eyed, she watched him ride away in the moonlight, sitting in his worn saddle with a dashing grace; his battered Stetson at a rakish angle, and two gun-butts glinting in low-slung holsters. Slowly, she realized that he had said nothing about love. Still, his eyes had told her that he loved her! For the first time since they had been in this warring county, she went to bed glad that her father had come to Texas.

THE next morning, she was saddling Sultan when Dan Harmon rode into the yard, "I'll start your herd north," he said, with his flashing smile. "No need for you to go."

"But I want to go!" she cried, her heart lifting in that new thrill.

He swung to the ground. "Listen, Olga. It may mean a fight, and you—" He stopped, and his eyes, which had been soft as drifting clouds went hard and cold as obsidian.

Following his glance, she saw a magnificent black stallion coming through the gate. Its rider, a raw-boned, hawk-faced man in expensive range clothes, dismounted and came toward them. "I'm your neighbor on the north, Miss Jansen," he said blandly. "And if there's anything the Rocking M can do for you—"

"Such as stampeding her cattle or cutting off her water supply!" Harmon cut in sharply.

The big rancher's thin lips tightened. "Don't believe all this soreheads says, Miss Jansen. He goes around looking for trouble."

"When I start looking for you, Bullard, it will be with a red-hot .44," Harmon blazed. Then his voice turned silken-soft. "I'm about to cut the fence you threw up around the north-end water hole. If you think you can stop me, now is a good time to try."

"My waddies will stop you."

"Still hiding behind your gunslicks!" The slender-hipped cowboy took a menacing step. "I've a notion to give you the beating you deserve!"

"Dan, please—" Olga gasped.

With an incredibly swift move, Harmon jerked the six-gun from Bullard's holster. Shoving it into the owner's big-boned hand, he said coolly, "Now use that—if you've got the guts. It will be the first even break I ever had from you."

For a split second, Death hovered in the air . . . And Olga felt a surge of anger against Dan Harmon. He wasn't only looking for trouble—he was forcing it!

But the big man holstered his gun, saying gruffly, "This isn't the time nor place to fight."

"Then I'll fight you any time and place you name," the cowboy challenged. "In the meantime, your fence is coming down!" Flinging himself into his saddle, he rode scornfully through the gate.

"Tug Bullard, have your riders been stampeding my cattle?" Olga asked sharply.

"Course not," he answered. "When I saw you in Valverde yesterday, I decided you could graze your two-bit herd in my ranch house yard, if it pleased you." He was looking at her with an avid hunger in his colorless eyes that made her a little sick.

"All right," she said coldly, "I'll stop Dan Harmon. Our creek went dry, and he—"

"Offered to cut my fence so your herd could get water," he laughed. "Well, let him! I bought up the mortgage on his Flying U—will be taking it over soon—so there's no sense in fighting."

Impulsive, quick to anger and as quick to forgive, Olga's resentment against Dan vanished. Evidently he was desperate, making a last stand—The thought was interrupted by old Nord Jansen's voice, coming from the cabin in an irritable bawl: "Olga, who's out there?"

Reluctantly, she led Bullard to her father, sitting in a high-backed rocker, his bandaged leg on another chair.

AN hour later, when the whip-hand rancher left, there was new hope in Jansen's weathered face. "I'm thinkin' our luck's changed," he exulted. "Offhand, I'd say the Boss of Sagishaw County has taken a shine to my girl!"

Memory of a dark, reckless face flashed into Olga's mind; a kiss that had lifted her heart to a lilting throb. In an outburst of rebellion, she cried, "We don't need his help, dad—Oh, I hate him!"

"Gosh a'mighty, girl," he barked, "don't you go starting him on the prod!"

But there was something like fear in his faded blue eyes, and she promised hastily, "I'll try not to offend him, Dad."

That night she sat on the steps, watching the dusty road which the moon-drenched night had turned to a ribbon of silver. But it brought no dashing rider with metal gun-butts gleaming against slender thighs.

The next morning, Olga wasn't surprised to find the cattle gone from the Sink. On her way to the water hole, she was met by the hawk-faced Bullard. "You're too pretty to be riding herd," he told her. "So I bunched your cattle with mine. They're safe with four dozen Rocking M waddies on the range."

"Four dozen!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, I believe in playing safe. You see, I'm not exactly popular around here. Most of the two-bit ranchers are going under, and I'm taking over their spreads."

Her blue eyes narrowed. "That doesn't seem fair to the old-timers."

"It's life, girl. As for me, I generally get what I want." That nauseating hunger was in his eyes again, as his big-boned hand closed over her slim, brown fingers. "And I've decided that I want—you!"

His face was close to hers now and Olga felt a revulsion she could not hide. Her eyes were wide, fear-filled as he tried to draw her nearer, as his thick lips tried to find hers.

"Why, you must be crazy!" she cried, jerking free.

Bullard's eyes narrowed for a moment, and Olga cringed away from him. But finally he smiled, and the tension broke, though his words were fraught still with a danger that scared Olga, made her wish that Dan Harmon could only be around to help her.

"You're gorgeous enough to drive a man crazy," Tug Bullard said. "Why, girl, I'll marry you—make you queen of Sagishaw County!"

"But I don't want to marry you—I don't love you!" she said, impulsively. "There's—"

"Someone else?" Bullard asked, then he shrugged his shoulders. "Forget him! I told you I always get what I want." He smiled thinly. "Mind if I ride home with you?"

Olga thought of her father, their cattle, their new home. She knew she had to be nice to Tug Bullard, however much she detested his ways, the manner in which his eyes seemed to undress her every time he looked at her. "No—of course not," she faltered.

AS they pulled up before the cabin, Jansen hobbled to the door. "Find the cattle, Olga?" he asked.

"I hazed them to the upper range where there's plenty of grass and water," Bullard told him. "You can rest easy until fall round-up."

"That's fine!" the old man enthused. "By then, I'll be ridin' again."

When Bullard left, Olga started again for the north-end water hole, and—yes, Dan Harmon had kept his word. The fence was down! At a sound she turned, saw the black-haired cowboy sitting his saddle with lazy grace. Her heart-beat quickened, as he drew his sorrel up beside her.

"Been hanging around to see what would happen," he said. "Fact is, I hazed your herd over here yesterday, and this morning they were gone." His voice hardened. "But I'll find 'em, Olga! That snaky Bullard is up to some trick—!"

"You're wrong, Dan," she interrupted. "He bunched our cattle with his, and is going to look out for them until round-up."

Dan Harmon's face went stormy. "So that's what the rat is up to! He let me cut this fence because he knows he had no legal right to put it there. Instead of fighting, he gets control of your cattle. The white-livered skunk would bite in the dark, but he won't come out in the open and fight!"

Olga shook her head, said unhappily, "Can't you think of anything but fighting, Dan?"

"Why should I?" he retorted. "I can draw faster and shoot straighter than any hombre in Sagishaw County, and I don't scare easy—which that land hog is beginning to find out! If he—"

"You might try talking reason to him," Olga suggested then..

"The only talk that maverick can understand is hot lead," he rasped. "And I'll prod him into a fight, if it's the last thing I ever do!"

She stared at him, tawny-lashed eyes narrowed. This wasn't the friendly boy she had met on Sunset Mesa. Here was a swag-

gering, boasting, almost ruthless, hard-eyed man, proud of his quick draw, hungering for the deadly crash of bullets. She couldn't—shouldn't love such a man!

But she had to try to make him see thing differently—try to tell him, even if she couldn't quite bring herself to say it in words, how much he meant to her. How terribly afraid she was that a tangle with Tug Bullard might bring to a sudden end all her hopes and her plans, her love for Dan.

She put out her hand, caught his, drew him nearer to her, so that her shoulder brushed his chest as he sat there astride his sorrel. She looked up in his eyes, try to convey with her own the message that lay in her heart. But his face was set, and his eyes grim, even though he could not help but see that, from within the innermost depths of her body, so close, so intimately in contact with him, she was begging him, asking him, not to go on the way he planned. For their sake!

He shook his head, drew his hand from hers.

Olga flared, turned her horse sharply. "All right then, go ahead and fight—but stay away from Grama Sink!"

"Olga, wait!" There was no mistaking the love in that desperate appeal. But without a backward glance, she sent her horse on.

FOF a week, Olga struggled to forget Dan Harmon. But his reckless young face, with its firmly chiseled jaw and sensitive mouth, haunted her day and night. Neither could she completely hide her aversion for the hawk-faced rancher who had become a constant visitor at the cabin.

Tug Bullard saw through her veiled politeness. He laughed harshly. "Better get used to me, girl," he said. "You're going to have to."

Whenever she rode out, he managed to meet her. One day, Harmon dashed past them with a devil-may-care flourish of his floppy Stetson. And the scorn in his dark eyes seared Olga's heart like a branding iron. Perhaps he thought her kisses were cheap—that she was playing up to the powerful rancher.

That night, as she listened to the wind whispering through the scrubby junipers back of the cabin, she seemed to hear Dan calling, "Olga, wait!" The love, the desperate appeal in his voice tore at her heart strings. But she told herself that he was a two-gun man; that life with him would mean days of fear, nights filled with dreams of dead men and the clink of handcuffs. Besides, there was her father—

But with the first streak of dawn, she was ready to pay any price for the pressure of Dan's arms, the crush of his lips against hers. She'd go to him, admit that she loved him. Nothing else mattered.

She found him riding from the pasture above his weathered ranch house. "Dan, I had to see you!" she cried, her voice husky, breathless. "I want you to know that when I let you kiss me, it was because—"

"Because of the moon, I reckon." He laughed without mirth. "Funny what the moon'll do to folks! But I won't mention it to Bullard, if that is what's bothering you."

His words struck her like a blow, and her quick anger flared. "At least, Tug Bullard has the manners of a gentleman! He wants—"

"I know. He wants you! Well, if you're not overly particular, he'll make you a good husband. He can give you plenty, including the sweat and blood of just about every ranch in Sagishaw County!"

"Thanks for the information," she said coldly, turning Sultan.

And then a firm, browned hand closed over her arm. "Olga, you're too good, too sweet for that sidewinder! He's at the top, but he climbed there over ruined homes and dead men. You couldn't be happy with him!"

His eyes were telling her that he loved her, and Olga forgot everything else. With her usual impulsiveness, she burst out, "If you don't want me to marry Bullard, is there—? Have you any one else in mind, Dan?"

His hand dropped from her arm, and he said, in a strangely wooden voice, "No, I'm not suggesting a husband for you."

The tumbled hills seemed to close around Olga in a mad, black swirl. Dan didn't love her—didn't want her! And she had thrown herself at him—Blindly, she lifted the reins, and Sultan lunged into a gallop.

But when he slowed up on the steep

side of a draw, Harmon's sorrel was still siding him. "You going to the rodeo at Valverde, Olga?" the cowboy asked pleasantly.

"Are you?" she countered, in a desperate effort to be casual.

"Sure. Going to win enough prize money to buy me a new corral."

Her own bitter pain and burning mortification made her want to hurt him. "Still boasting!" she flung out. "You certainly have a good opinion of yourself."

His reckless young face sobered. "I've got to have that, Olga. It takes a good man to buck the tricky Rocking M outfit." Then he flashed his white-toothed smile. "You're some rider, yourself! If you'll go to the rodeo with me, and enter—"

"I'm going with Tug," she said in a choked voice.

There was a moment of stark silence. Then, "Oh, yeah, I plumb forgot you'd gone over where the grass is green. Well, you can watch me carry off most of the first prizes." Lifting his battered Stetson, he disappeared through a dip in the hills.

Olga fought back hot tears. She had just about proposed to him, and he—"Oh I hate him—the big braggart!" she stormed. "Now I *will* go to the rodeo with that beastly Tug Bullard."

THREE days later, in blue shirt, trim riding breeches, and Mexican boots, Olga rode to Valverde with the hawk-faced boss of Sagishaw County. Sultan side-stepped his way through the narrow street, gay with flags, and crowded with booted and spurred cowboys. Admiring glances followed the slender girl on the prancing roan, as she and Bullard made their way to the rodeo grounds.

When they pulled up behind the chutes, a swarthy halfbreed from the Rocking M hurried up to take their broncs. Bulalrd said sharply, "I thought you were saddling broncs, Stope!"

The half-breed's eyes licked hungrily over Olga as he helped her dismount. She cringed from the touch of his hand as he helped her down. He spoke, grinning, to his boss, "Si. Een th' firs' chute. They do not use heem yet."

Tug Bullard nodded his head, turned to Olga. "Wait here for me. I got to see a man. Be back in a minute."

Olga nodded and walked away toward the stable reserved for the Rocking M mounts. She'd get her saddle and she'd ride any horse in the girls' string—

She was lost in her thoughts and she didn't hear the soft footsteps that came up behind her. Not until hot breath fanned the back of he rneck and hands gripped her arms roughly, did she turn and recognize Stope, the half-breed ranny who worked for Bulard.

She felt herself being pushed toward a shed behind the stable, and Stope loosed one hand, covered her mouth with it. She fought madly against him, turned her face away from the slavering face that bent toward her lips. She had one hand free now and was pummeling at the half-breed but he only laughed at her, soundlessly, his mouth an ugly grin, his eyes volcanoes of pent-up hunger.

He had her in the doorway of the shed now. She flailed at him with her legs, buried one knee in his mid-section. She heard a groan and his grip relaxed, his hand dropped from her mouth. Then she screamed and rushed out of the shed. Stope stumbled after her, and before she had taken a dozen steps, he was upon her, his heavy frame bearing her to the ground, his hands clawing, tearing at her body.

Just as her strength seemed to be gone completely and it seemed hopeless to fight back, she felt him jerked away from her. She looked past him and saw Tug Bullard. His face was livid and his eyes wild.

BULLARD twisted Stope around, found his throat with his big hands and squeezed. The half-breed tried to fight back, but the grip on his neck was relentless. His eyes bulged out, and animal-like noises blubbered past his blue lips. Then he became quiet and Bullard dropped him to the ground, kicked him as he went past to the trembling figure of Olga Jansen.

"Are you all right, Olga?" he said, softly.

There was real concern in his eyes, Olga noticed, and she wondered whether she had perhaps midjudged this man; that maybe her aversion to him before had no foundation in fact. She was sobbing as he put his arm around her, steadied her. "I'm all right, I guess. Thanks, Tug. I didn't think you—"

She brought the quirt up and across his face, the hard leather leaving a raw, red streak across it.

"Didn't think I cared enough to mind what that skunk was trying to do?" Tug Bullard smiled. "Maybe I didn't realize it myself—until I saw him. I said I'd make you queen of the range Olga. I'm willing to wait—to get what I want."

Olga's glance lifted and she saw Dan Harmon sauntering by, his floppy Stetson at a rakish angle. He was so cocksure of himself, she thought. Well, she'd show him that he wasn't the only one who could ride.

"Thanks, anyhow, Tug. And listen," her voice was higher now. She wanted to be sure Dan Harmon could hear her. "I want to try that outlaw horse everybody is talking about."

"Whatever you want," he answered promptly. "I'll see that you get Gray Night in the girls' bronco-riding—" Then it came.

"Not while I'm here, you won't!" Harmon had whirled, swung back to face the big rancher. "No girl can ride that gray killer—and you know it!"

"You're impertinent, ranny!" Bullard snarled.

"Perhaps he doesn't know I'm with you Tug," Olga offered, with mock sweetness.

"I don't care who you're with, I'll still keep you from getting on that killer," Harmon said evenly; turned and swung off into the crowd.

"The devil with him!" Bullard gritted. "You won't be hurt, Olga. A shot of dope will take the salt out of Night, and I'll have one of my men—"

"Do you mean that?" she demanded, smouldering revulsion for the man surging back into her tawny-lashed eeys.

"It's the only way you'll ride him," he answered, with a laugh. "Gray Night has already put three men under the daisies."

"Then I'll ride some other horse," she muttered.

"Whatever you say, beautiful," She cringed from the touch of his big-boned hand, as he added, "Watch the show for a while. I'll be back soon."

TWO hours passed, and it was nearly time for the girl's bronco-riding contest. As Bullard had not returned, Olga decided to get her saddle.

Her breath caught sharply, as Dan Harmon appeared from nowhere blocking her path. "Are you aiming to fork Gray Night in the next event?" he asked grimly.

"It's none of your business," she snapped.

"Maybe not. But Bullard has gone plumb loco, or—" Again she saw his eyes go from velvet-softness to hard obsidian. "You're not going to mount that killer, Olga!"

Bright head held high, she attempted to pass. To her amazement, his arms closed about her, and her startled scream was smothered against his broad chest. She kicked at his ankles and tried to twist out of his vice-like grip, but his arms held her helpless.

For a moment he held like that, his eyes softening, peering into the blue depth of her own. His breath seemed to accelerate, and the warmth of her seemed to divert his mind from his original plans. His lips found hers, instinctively.

Olga struggled against him, twisted her lips away from the pressure of his. She knew she wanted to be kissed by him, but her indignation got the best of her true feelings. His grip relaxed for a minute, as if apologetically, and she broke away from him with a suddenness that sent her off balance. Sent her sprawling, her long legs kicking high.

Dan Harmon stared; he gulped, reddened, as she rose. He started to say something, but he didn't have a chance to utter a word. Quirt in hand, she advanced toward him, her eyes flashing, her lips grim. She brought the quirt up and across his face, the hard leather leaving a red, raw streak across it.

For a moment they stared at each other. Mounting anger tore at Dan Harmon's heart, fear gripped hers. She hadn't meant to do that, but he should not have attempted such tactics.

Without a word he grabbed for her, tore the quirt from her hand. Then, roughly, he picked her up and carried her swiftly to a small empty shed behind the Rocking M stable. She was afraid to cry out, and something inside her told her that she wouldn't have anyway.

He sat down inside on an overturned box, still holding her tightly on his lap his lips grim, the felt on his face standing out ghastly in the emi-darkness.

"I hate to do this, Olga," he said quietly, "and I guess it doesn't make much difference now, if you hate me that much. But if you'll promise not to get on that bronc—"

Anger flooded her face, and she beat at him with little fists. "I won't promise anything!"

"Then you'll stay here until the girls are through ridin'."

She tried to break away tried to loosen the tight grip of his arms around her struggling body, but Dan Harmon was determined and her efforts only made him draw his clasp tighter. He knew she would ride Gray Night, if she had the chance, and although he was hurt and angry at the way she had treated him, he could not let her go out there, out of her own pique, and get killed.

"Stop it!" he told her, "I don't want to hurt you, Olga. You're not getting loose to ride Gray Night. That's all there is to it. You can scream your head off, if you've a mind to, but I'm not letting go."

There was scorn in her voice as she spoke, "I suppose that's just what you want, so you'd get a fight out of Tug Bullard that way. Well, I won't scream, not if you kill me!"

Harmon smiled at that; she was reaching the hysterical point, he realized. He wondered how much she really objected to being held by him, how much more than just wounded pride kept her still struggling against him.

"I'm not thinking of Bullard," he said softly.

"Then you're afraid I might win that prize money!" she stormed.

"I'm not thinking of money, either."

HIS grip relaxed a bit. The sweet smell of her hair was in his nostrils, and his heart beat wildly within his body and not from the exertion of holding her still. Against him, her struggles became weaker, as though some of the inner turmoil of his heart was being in some way transferred to her.

But she had to get away! She'd show this bragging cowboy that she could and would ride Gray Night! With one mighty heave she broke his grip, lost her balance for a minute, then regained it and rushed for the entrance of the shack.

She wasn't quite fast enough, as with a leap, Dan grabbed her, roughly pulled her back. She went sprawling, and in attempting to catch her, keep her from falling, Dan went down with her. They struggled for a moment on the floor, then she went limp, all the fight gone out of her. She began to cry, her sobs shaking the length of her body.

Gently Dan Harmon lifted her up, held her in his arms, his lips touching tenderly the moist surface of her cheek. He sat down again with her, holding her like a baby in his arms.

With a groan, her arms went around him. And a strange sort of peace stole over her. . . .

THE girls' events were all over when he finally put her down, and he sat there, his senses still reeling from the precious moments of ecstasy he had never imagined could have been his. He watched her as she fixed her hair, smoothed out the wrinkles in her clothes. Her face was flushed and her eyes still held that dreamy look that had come into them after she had ceased her struggling, when their lips had met.

Her red-headed temper returned slowly. She realized that he had won—almost. "Oh, I hate you for this, Dan Harmon!" she flared.

He smiled, and the old recklessness swept into his eyes. "You won't, after you see Gray Night in action. I'm ridin' him in the last event—to a finish, and without pick-up men."

Her lips curved scornfully, and her eyes narrowed. A plan began to formulate in her brain. "A safe boast!" she snapped. "You know the rodeo committee won't allow—"

"They're old top-hands, and they agreed they'd like to see a real ride in the arena. You can watch me win that new fence."

As he walked off with his swinging stride, Olga felt an added surge of rebellion. The nerve of him—holding her a prisoner! Her face flushed at the remembrance of those moments in the shack, but anger turned her thoughts momentarily to the plan that was taking form in her mind. "If I can manage . . ." That would show him up, teach him not to go around bragging! She was almost as tall as Dan, and if she could reach his stirrups—!

She managed to keep out of Dan Harmon's sight during the next few hours. She watched as Gray Night was put in the chute. As Dan handed up his saddle she emerged from around a corner of the stands and as his back was turned, she touched his arm, said in as husky a voice as she could manage, "You're wanted in the judges' stand. Hurry, it's important!" Then she passed on quickly to disappear around the other side of the chute. Dan was so intent on his forthcoming ride that he didn't even look around. As he walked away he wondered if the judges were going to tell him he couldn't ride Gray Night without pick-up men after all. He'd had a hard time convincing them before, although he hadn't told Olga that.

Without attracting too much attention, Olga climbed the chute where Stope was giving a final hitch to the cinch. "You better get to the stable Stope!" she cried. "There's some trouble—" Just as she had expected Stope being trouble shooter for the Rocking M, also left without question. With her heart going like a trip-hammer, Olga eased herself into the saddle of the lunging horse.

"Hey, what the hell, gal! Yuh loco?" yelled the startled helper.

"It's all right." She tried to hold her voice steady. "I'm substituting for Dan Harmon." The gray devil under her reared and kicked as her feet found the stirrups. Her hand tightened on the bridle reins. "Ready!" she snapped.

The gate opened and a gray bulk of living rage catapulted into the arena with a fair, slender girl solidly in the saddle. Great muscles bunched, the outlaw sunfished, swapped ends, cut dizzy arcs, and came down on all fours, back arched like a spitting cat. Still the girl's slim legs held their vice-like grip.

A breathless hush fell over the crowd. There was no sound but the pounding thud of those killer hoofs, beating through thin-edged silence like drums of doom.

The big gray whirled until the chutes and grandstand swept past Olga's vision in a reeling blur. Jerked back and forth, rammed against the saddle horn, she felt as though her back had cracked in a dozen places.

But all that was nothing to the pain of wounded pride. This was showing Dan Harmon that he couldn't order her around! Now, maybe he'd stop bragging— Her hair shook loose, swept around her in a misty, red-gold cloud, while her indomitable will fought against the brute strength of the killer horse.

The hushed silence continued—a silence that beat against the eardrums. It was as though Time had stopped, waiting for those drumming hoofs to take their toll of death. Now the gray was rearing, pawing the air. Up and up, he rose—"

A woman screamed. A man yelled, "He's throwing himself backward!" For a split second, the huge animal tottered on his hind legs—he was going over. . . .

WHEN he hit the ground, Olga had swung clear. He rolled over, scrambled up. And when his four hoofs were once more planted in the dust, the slim, red-headed girl was in the saddle again!

The tense silence was ripped apart by wild hysterical cheers. Expecting to see Death the crowd had witnessed an exhibition of riding that few topnotch bronc-peelers could equal. But the outlaw wasn't conquered yet. Barrel swelling, he went into the air again.

And then stark terror struck at Olga's heart as she felt the saddle slipping—felt herself going down. With the pound of those ironshod hoofs in her ears, with death swooping down on her, her heart lifted in a last mute cry: "Dan! Dan darling—"

As though in answer to that silent call she glimpsed the black-haired cowboy tearing toward her, his legs working like pistons. Then the ground surged up and hit her. She heard the rage-crazed scream of the gray, felt his fiery breath as he reared above her killer-hoofs ready to descend. With a shuddering moan she dug deeper into the dust. . . .

A spurred boot raked across her hand drawing a spurt of blood. And then she knew that Dan Harmon by the sheer strength of his muscular body, had swerved the gray killer just in time.

As the pick-up men tore into the arena Harmon lifted her his voice coming rough with emotion: "You beautiful glorious rid in'—fool! Are you hurt?"

"I—I'm all right," she stammered, hiding her roweled hand. "The cinch broke——"

Pick-up men were roping the outlaw, and Harmon bent to examine the saddle on the ground. Straightening, he faced Bullard, who had come up on a run, ahead of the crowd surging toward them.

"You'll explain that broken cinch, *hombre!*" the cowboy rapped out.

"What d'you mean?" snarled Bullard.

"Your man slapped my saddle on that bronc—and his knife-work shows good and plenty!" Harmon's words pelted him like bullets. "You can answer to the rodeo committee. But if this girl had been harmed I'd have ripped you to hellangone with my two hands!"

"If you'd like to try that meet me at Henderson's Mill in an hour," the big-boned man said, in a guarded voice.

"It's a date!" Harmon turned, shouldered his way through the crowd.

There was something in the hawk-faced man's colorless eyes that struck terror to Olga's heart. If he had tampered with Dan's saddle-gear, no trick was too low for him. And that old mill was isolated,

deserted! Somehow, she'd have to keep him away from there. . . .

With her hand aching horribly, through a daze of pain, she said, "The show's over, Tug. Can't we start home? I feel sort of shaky."

"Too shaky to do any more riding for awhile," he answered decisively. Commandeering a buckboard, he drove her to the hotel. But when her hand was bandaged, he disappeared.

The fear in Olga's heart leaped higher. "I've got to find him!" she thought, running outside.

On the board walk, she was stopped by a black-whiskered ruffian from the Rocking M. "You'll haf'ta wait here fer th' boss miss," he told her. "Them's orders."

She turned back into the hotel, her fear a raging fire. If Bullard had gone after his horse—Climbing through a side window, she ran all the way to the deserted rodeo grounds. A cut across lots brought her to the shed behind the Rocking M stable. And then she went rigid, frozen into immobility, as Bullard's lowered voice reached her:

"Hide yourself in that mesquite patch south of the mill, Stope. When Harmon faces me, let him have it in the back! And be sure you shoot straight—that rany is greased lightning on the draw. Now get going!" There was the creak of saddle leather the quick clatter of hoofs.

WHEN Olga reached the front of the stable there was only a drifting dust cloud. Two killers were heading for Henderson's Mill. And it was too late to go for help! Still if she could warn Dan—"Dear God let me get there in time," she prayed.

Her roweled hand forgotten, she saddled Sultan. The bandage was wet and sticky with blood when she mounted. Standing up in the stirrups, she leaned forward, crying, "Go, Sultan!" And again, with a sob in her husky voice. "Go! Go!" It was her well-known signal to the big roan for all the speed he had. And now he gave it to her. His rippling body flattened out and the ground blurred beneath the swift pound of his flailing hoofs.

When they topped the rise above the mill, Olga could see Bullard on his black stallion, heading for the north bend. Just below, in the mesquite, she glimpsed the outline of a greasy Stetson. Stope! Crouching low over the saddle horn, she sent Sultan racing down a brush-choked draw, straight across the small clearing in front of the mill, expecting each second to feel the crashing impact of a bullet.

As she swung to the ground, the mill door opened and Harmon stood there, his face a grim, bronze mask. "Olga, you!" he cried, starting toward her. "What—?"

In frantic haste, she pushed him inside, told him of the ambush plan.

"I always knew that bush-whacker would get me unless I got him first," he rasped. Then his voice softened. "You shouldn't be here, Olga."

"W-what are you going to do?" she gasped.

"Get that skunk in the mesquite!" he gritted, jerking off his spurs.

"But Bullard is almost here—" Iron bands seemed to be tightening around her, cutting off her breath, squeezing the life from her body. She forgot that she had thrown herself at this man and been repulsed; forgot his prideful boasting, his hard belligerence. She knew only that if he walked into this death-trap, she couldn't go on living.

"Give me a gun," she cried, "and I'll hold Bullard off, while you—"

"I won't have you mixed up in this!" Lips set in a taut, strained line, he forced her to the door. "Go back to town! The breed won't shoot at you." Turning, he swung through a gaping window.

Fighting off a wave of dizziness, Olga moved to the window, saw a faint stirring in the mesquite. Dan was out there, working his way toward the killer. . . .

"Hold it, Stope!" Harmon's sharp command was followed by a swift exchange of shots.

Stifling a scream, Olga ran to the door. The two men had blazed their way to the edge of the clearing. Stope's gun was belching flame. And Harmon, under a rain of bullets, was bearing down on him, .44 bucking in each hand. Suddenly, some mighty force seemed to lift the breed's heavy body and hurl it to earth again, where it lay motionless.

And now another gun barked, as the black stallion tore around the bend. In

(*Continued on page* 93)

. . . DUDE DAMES

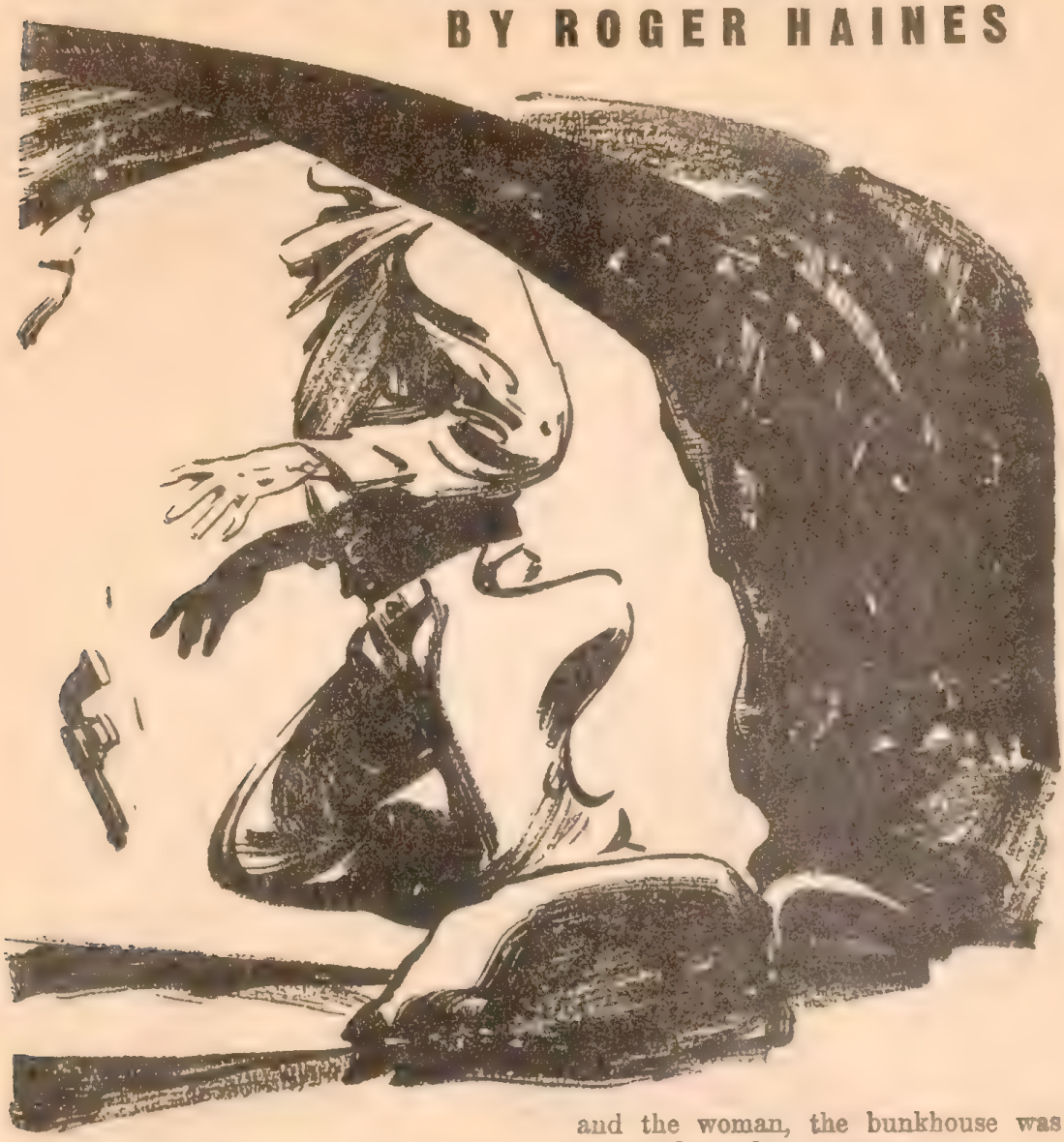
Big Bill was startled to see her resting a Winchester across the body, and smoke curling from the gun.

Illustrated by Joseph Sokoli

Big Bill's thoughts were so snarled up he couldn't straighten out the crazy new angles of all this monkey business, not to mention some of the coyote business—but he aimed to stay in there fightin', posses and all, till the mystery was hogtied!

ARE DANGEROUS

BY ROGER HAINES



BIG BILL DANVERS was hot under the collar as soft, willing arms encircled his neck. Tempting lips rubbed along his blue-shaved jaw. Moonlight slanted through but one window of the Lazy-Diamond bunkhouse. It splashed silver outside around the corral where a few "dude" cowhands perched on the top rail and chewed the fat.

The woman was wearing fancy riding pants, the like of which had never been seen in the Shoshone range until the dude gals had come along. Except for Big Bill and the woman, the bunkhouse was untenanted at the moment.

For a split second Big Bill was tempted. His hands slipped along the woman's waist. But he pushed her away quickly.

He said, "Reckon your husband'll be lookin' for you any minute, ma'am. 'Taint fitten he should find you in the bunkhouse this-a-way."

Maybe Big Bill hadn't heard that one about the fury of hell and a woman scorned, but he savvied plenty of dynamite in this woman's voice as she hissed at him.

"Now if it had been Elaine who had come along—"

Bill shouldn't have clamped a hard hand over the woman's mouth. It was a part of his despised job to know that any dude, woman or man, is always right. He might hate this playing dude cowboy for the entertainment of these Eastern nitwits, but the Lazy-Diamond paid a hundred a month.

For this Big Bill wore a fancy, braided sombrero, silver conchaed chaps and a fancier checked shirt, when he would have preferred his old levis and his moth-eaten bear-skin leggers. He might hate all of this, and he did to the depths of his guts, but he was still a lowly cowhand without any rights.

So he shouldn't have followed up his throttling hold upon the woman's soft mouth by what he told her.

"You be leavin' the gal out'n this, ma'am!" he said harshly. "You're her aunt an' old enough to be her mother, an' you ought-a take shame at mentionin' her!"

The woman suddenly snapped her white teeth into Big Bill's hand. The Lazy-Diamond bunkhouse had never heard a nicer string of oaths than that which came from the woman's mouth. Then she turned and darted toward the bunkhouse door.

Big Bill clumped to the doorway, but the woman was slipping away into shadows under the cottonwoods. And just as she had stepped from the door, she had uttered a little scream.

Big Bill swore under his breath as he stepped out. He knew every pair of eyes over by the corral had turned in that direction.

"Damn a dude woman that's wantin' to break loose from her rightful hitchin' harness, an' damn all dudes an' the job that goes with 'em," he muttered. "I might as well be handin' in my ridin' ticket here an' now, 'fore I git deeper into this ruckus."

Big Bill strode toward the figures perched on the corral rail. He was thinking that forty-a-month and found wouldn't be so bad now. Anyway, ropin' and brandin' cows might be tough, but the cows never turned around and tried to rope and brand you.

" 'Tween women critters an' cow critters, it's the cow critters that has the most hoss sense," murmured Big Bill. "I wisht this Harrington hombre would pull stakes an' take his women folks back East—now what in all hell?"

THE Harrington hombre, of whom Big Bill had just spoken, crossed a patch of moonlight near the guest house for dudes. He was Homer Harrington and it was reported on the Lazy-Diamond he was one of the biggest ramrods on the Eastern market where they chalked up price brands for good western cattle.

Big Bill was pleased to see that Harrington apparently had not been a witness to the woman's departure from the bunkhouse. For the dude woman was the missus of Homer Harrington. The dude gal she had mentioned was Elaine Erskine, Harrington's niece.

Even now, for all of his short temper over the advances of the delectable Mrs. Harrington, Big Bill found time to grin a little. For Elaine's aunt had been more than guessing. Elaine had paid a little visit to the Lazy-Diamond bunkhouse two different nights, and, even if her lovely dude auntie wouldn't have believed it, Big Bill hadn't so much as kissed her.

No. The dude gal who was reported to be heiress to more mazuma than any other dozen dude gals visiting the Shoshone range, didn't appear to have gone haywire over Big Bill like some of the other gals. She had been wanting that Big Bill should act as her personal guide on a mountain trip, but Big Bill wasn't the aim and object of that proposed sashay into the far hills.

For Miss Elaine Erskine had something on her mind besides her silky, black hair, and she had a heap of common sense to back up her pretty face. She wanted Big Bill to arrange the mountain trip in order that she might size up the Eastern hombre who was close herding the Harrington party with an idea of putting his brand permanent on the Erskin filly.

The way Big Bill had got it, Elaine wasn't head over ears for this Eastern ranny, who was named J. Roger Larner, and who was as long and rangy as Big Bill himself. The way Elaine had put it up to Big Bill, although not in the same lingo, she wanted J. Roger Larner to meet up with some rough stuff in the hills to dis-

cover if his guts equaled his white-toothed smile.

AS HE walked toward the corral, and saw Homer Harrington apparently on his way to join his somewhat maverick wife at the guest house, Big Bill Danvers guessed this unexpected foray of the lovely and willing Mrs. Harrington just about washed him up. He made a wry grimace as he strode toward the corral.

"Won't be any pasear into the hills, which'd made the rest o' the season bearable," muttered Big Bill. "It'd a-pleasured me a heap to see how that dude gal would-a worked it out with this J. Roger. I'd a—"

Big Bill was abruptly confronted by the tall figure of this dude, J. Roger Larner himself. Larner stepped from the black shadow of a cottonwood tree, planting himself in front of the gaudily rigged dude puncher.

Larner's white teeth were not showing and his voice grated.

"So you're one of those dude waddies that likes to play his cards for more than their faces read!" snarled Larner. "I'd heard you had been seeing Miss Erskine privately, but I hadn't believed it until just a minute ago when she came out of the bunkhouse!"

Big Bill's teeth snapped shut on what he might have said. After all, even if the lovely Mrs. Harrington was a bit too willing to range about, he was not of a mind to let go the loop on his tongue. He didn't like the accusation and he didn't like anything about this white-faced Easterner, Larner, but he judged it best to pass it off. Larner would have to believe what he pleased.

"You heered wrong, Mr. Larner," he said mildly. "I've never seen your dude gal alone, 'cept for some palaver over guidin' the both o' you on a mountain trip—"

"Damn liar!" rapped out Larner, and his left fist flicked out. "I saw Miss Erskine just after she screamed!"

Now Big Bill was as handy a waddy as ever whirled a rope, and as quick on a six-gun draw as any hombre on the Shoshone. He was as strong as a bear when it came to wrestling. Also, he could swing a fist in a powerful haymaker.

So Big Bill still tried to stall off the raging Larner as the left fist grazed his chin. And at that same instant, Big Bill was sure he saw Elaine, the dude gal, move away from behind the nearby cottonwoods.

Big Bill started to say again, "You made a mistake, for I—"

From there on, Big Bill had a queer sense of being smothered under a stampede of fists. He couldn't reach for his six-gun with J. Roger Larner pushing all of this ruckus onto him with nothing but his bare knuckles. And during the next thirty seconds he learned more about the Eastern art of boxing than he had ever known was to be learned, only he didn't remain in position to appreciate it.

For all of his white face and his long, soft hands, Larner could sling his fists faster than most gun slicks could sling bullets. Big Bill countered once only, and staggered Larner with a wide swinging haymaker. But that left him wide open, and a choppy punch that traveled only eight inches to his chin left him counting the stars through the ragged limbs of a cottonwood.

"And from here on, I'll see that Miss Erskine has a different personal guide!" snapped J. Roger Larner, turning away from the temporarily humbled and dusted-off dude cowboy.

Big Bill got up slowly and a couple of guffaws died out among his fellow dude riders. They had one look at Big Bill's face and his icy grey eyes and decided to leave him alone.

BIG BILL wasn't the stripe to let a fair and square licking rankle in his bosom. Even if J. Roger Larner had been mistaken, the dude Easterner had put it over on Big Bill with his new brand of box fighting, so the waddy couldn't hold that against him.

"But damn it all!" gritted Big Bill. "How'd he git the idea it was the Erskine filly an' not the Harrington maverick in the bunkhouse tonight?"

Anyway, Big Bill was headed straight for the big house. Jim Colton could take this Lazy-Diamond job with his compliments. He'd go back to riding the cow range with pleasure.

"I'm wonderin' if that Erskine filly could-a seen Larner when he mixed it with

me?" mused Big Bill. "You don't s'pose she'd pull suthin' to bring on a ruckus, followin' out her line o' provin' if Larner has got real guts?"

Big Bill was recalling he had seen Elaine Erskine flitting away among the trees after he had been accosted by Larner. He made a rough guess that these Eastern dudes didn't throw all of their loops straight.

"Wouldn't put it past 'em to run some wrong brands when it comes to the matrimonial market," muttered Big Bill. "Anyway, I'm rollin' my tarp on my own, 'fore J. Roger Larner gets to Colton with his yarn."

But Big Bill wasn't rolling his tarp yet awhile. His estimation of the devious ways of the Eastern dudes was about to have another angle added.

HOMER HARRINGTON was bulky, with a fat face, and shrewd eyes that flicked around rather than looking straight. It was Harrington himself who stepped in front of Big Bill just before he reached the big house and the handing in of his ticket to Jim Colton.

Big Bill's hands came up instinctively. Maybe so Harrington hadn't made the same mistake as Larner about the dude woman most recently in Big Bill's arms in the bunkhouse. Big Bill hadn't been in a worse spot since a breachy cow had run him into a mudhole and kept him there all day boiling out in the sun.

"Look, Mr. Harrington—" he began.

"Come this way, Bill, and be quiet," cautioned Harrington, putting a hand upon his arm. "I've got something private to discuss."

So Harrington must have seen his run-around missus, was Big Bill's guess. And Big Bill had just taken one licking over a dude gal who wasn't there, and now he appeared to be headed for another trimming for the dude woman who had been there.

Harrington reached a dark corner by the big house. Big Bill flinched instinctively when Harrington suddenly thrust a hand into his coat pocket. Maybe Harrington was the kind that gunned down an hombre without any palavering.

And you couldn't just up and tell the big dude from the East that his missus had been throwing her loop high, wide and handsome, letting it fall upon whom it might. In this case it happened to be Big Bill.

And Big Bill guessed maybe so Harrington would be worse offended if he up and told him he didn't want any part of his dude wife. Some hombres are funny that way. Having his mind upon all this, and his hand fiddling around his six-gun in case of having to make a quick, defensive draw, Big Bill's breath was plumb stopped by what Harrington said.

"Bill," said Harrington, coming straight to the point, "I'm wanting you to abduct my niece Elaine, and ride off with her into the hills. She likes you, and I'd want you to keep her hidden for at least two weeks. I'm giving you a thousand bucks for the favor, and it'd be best if you see to it that she doesn't come back from her early ride tomorrow morning."

BIG BILL'S lower jaw dropped. That was a bad sign. His mind was almost stopped up. Then his brain started to work.

"Dangnation!" his thought exploded in his head. "The old devil seen his wife comin' from the bunkhouse, an' now he's framin' me into ridin' off with his niece, so's when he pumps me full o' lead poison he'll have a perfect alibi, and keep his own missus out-a it."

Out loud, Big Bill said in a controlled voice, "How come, Mr. Harrington? I just took one maulin' off'n J. Roger Larner on account of him being red-eyed about your niece, an' now you come along an' want I should lay my carcass li'ble to a lynchin' for kidnapin' the richest dude gal on the Shoshone? It don't make sense."

Harrington moved closer to Big Bill, and a wad of folding money came from his pocket.

"It's like this, Bill," he said. "This J. Roger Larner is a fortune hunter, an' he's already robbed some rich women back East. You'll be doing the noble thing, Bill, in making it appear that my niece has fallen in love with you and eloped. I figure that will save Elaine from the clutches of this scoundrel, and you're the only rider on the Lazy-Diamond I'd trust to do it."

He fingered the folding money. Big Bill's better judgment told him the whole idea was loco, but he hadn't often seen a thousand in real dinero. It would go a long

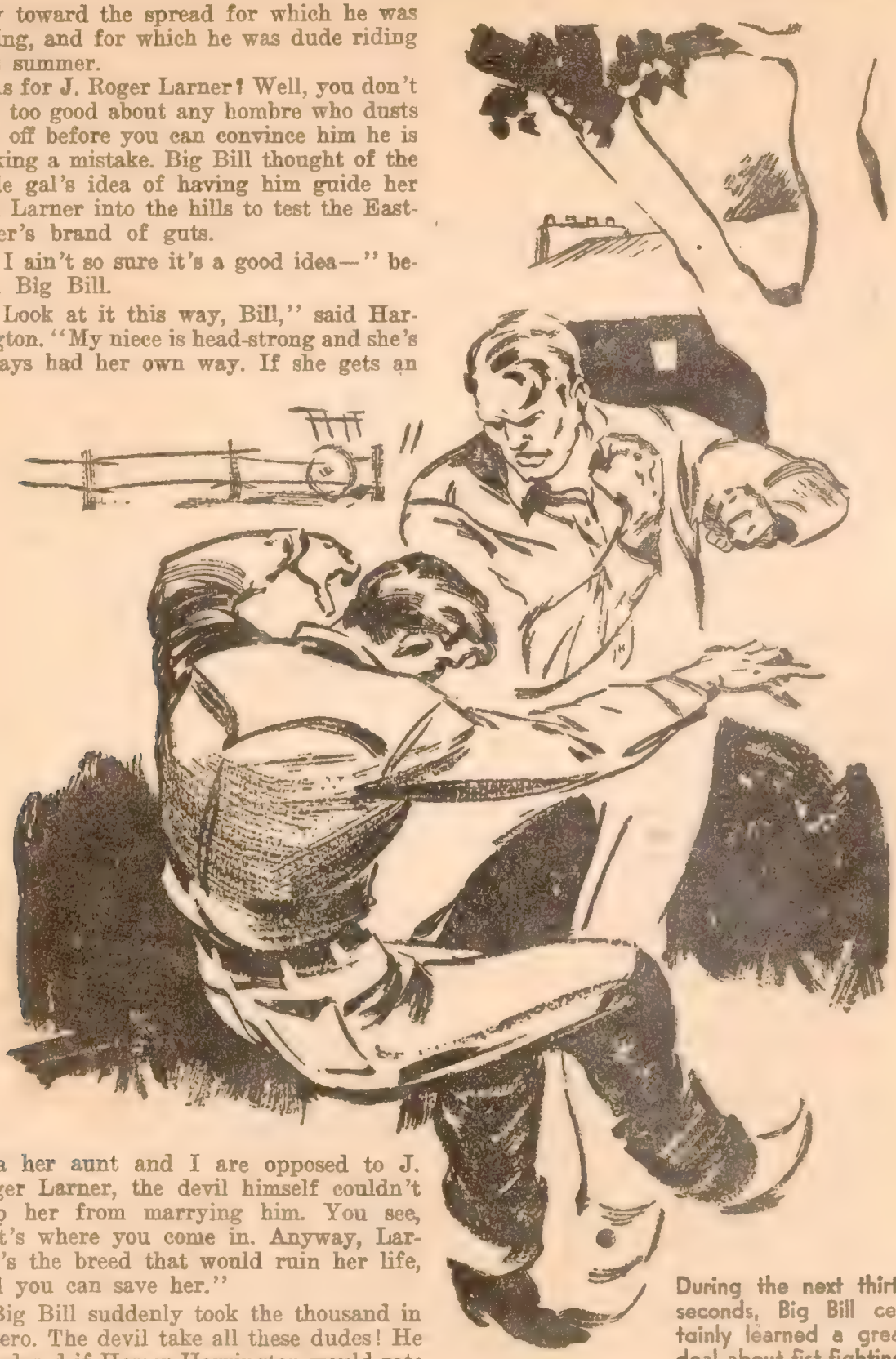
way toward the spread for which he was saving, and for which he was dude riding this summer.

As for J. Roger Larner? Well, you don't feel too good about any hombre who dusts you off before you can convince him he is making a mistake. Big Bill thought of the dude gal's idea of having him guide her and Larner into the hills to test the Easterner's brand of guts.

"I ain't so sure it's a good idea—" began Big Bill.

"Look at it this way, Bill," said Harrington. "My niece is head-strong and she's always had her own way. If she gets an idea her aunt and I are opposed to J. Roger Larner, the devil himself couldn't stop her from marrying him. You see, that's where you come in. Anyway, Larner's the breed that would ruin her life, and you can save her."

Big Bill suddenly took the thousand in dinero. The devil take all these dudes! He wondered if Homer Harrington would rate



During the next thirty seconds, Big Bill certainly learned a great deal about fist-fighting.

him so safe if he could have known of the recent shenanigans of his dude missus?

Dammit! Harrington was putting him in the same class as a nurse for his dude niece. It made him feel a lot less like a he-man. But a thousand in folding money wasn't to be picked up once in a blue moon on the Shoshone range.

"And Bill," added Harrington, "don't be getting ideas of your own. My niece isn't cut out to marry anyone below her station in life."

Big Bill just missed blowing up at that, but he had the feel of that folding money in his hand and he dallied his temper.

"Your niece'll be as safe as a sick calf with me," drawled Big Bill, and the way he hated all dude Easterners at the minute, he meant it.

BIG BILL DANVERS rode up onto the last ridge beyond the Lazy-Diamond and gave all of the surrounding range a look-see. No dust was stirring. Ahead was only the bright splash of color he knew to be Elaine Erskine.

Big Bill had thought that J. Roger Larner might be keeping an eye upon him, or upon the dude gal this morning. But it was early, and the sun had just broken through the blue haze of the hills ahead.

Big Bill wondered if the dude gal would notice the extra bulge of grub in his saddle-bags? He hadn't much heart in this chore. If the dude gal started cutting up rough, he wasn't sure he could use the right brand of persuasion to keep her with him.

"Betcha, if you drawed an iron an' pointed it at that filly, she'd laugh at you an' dare you to shoot," he muttered. "She'd know dang well you couldn't do it."

A rumble of thunder came from the blue haze ahead. If a storm broke down Shoshone canyon, it sometimes cut off the trails for a day or two. Maybe so that would be this break.

So Big Bill came riding upon Elaine Erskine suddeny as she rounded a jutting shoulder. Her paint pony fretted and reared. The girl's head was bare and her shining black hair ruffled in the wind.

"Whoa, Jingles!" she cried out, reining in the pony. "Bill? I'm sure glad to see you ride along! Looks as if there's a storm coming, and I got off the trail somewhere!"

This was a better break than Big Bill had expected. Simple enough, if the dude gal was lost, to lose her more completely. He said, "You're ridin' west, an' you ought-a be ridin' south. Seen you from the ridge an' figgered you was headed wrong!"

She lifted her pretty face. Big Bill had always had an idea that half of her appeal was in her big, black eyes. But there was a heap more to it this morning.

As her pony quieted, Big Bill imagined he caught a challenging light in the dude gal's eyes. But that might have been his conscience.

For Elaine Erskine was wearing a suit of Eastern slacks this morning. Big Bill noted with consternation that she had on some kind of contraptions that certainly were not riding boots. Her feet were white and bare, and for several seconds Big Bill thought she had been thorn-scratched. Her toes showed through sandals.

Then he saw that it was only some kind of red polish on the dude gal's toe-nails. Her black eyes followed his gaze quickly, and she laughed.

"I'll bet you're terribly shocked, Bill," she said. "I forgot about the riding togs, and it's because I like the morning air that I've always come riding like this alone in the mornings."

"Yes'm," gulped Big Bill. "So I s'pect I'd best be ridin' on, an' you can be turnin' toward the rightful trail."

Just for a minute he had forgotten all about his reason for being here. The lump of the folding money in his shirt brought it back to him. He stiffened his back in the saddle.

"I'll ride back then," said the dude gal slowly. "I wouldn't want to meet any other rider out here, an' me like this."

Big Bill may have imagined there was a blush on the dude gal's face, but if he had not been observing the rounded contour of her thigh against the saddle, he might have seen an odd gleam in her eyes.

Big Bill's only thought now was that he was in this thing, he would have to go through with it. The growling storm gave him a sudden break. Lightning zig-zagged across the canyon and a thunderbolt set the dude gal's pony on a spooked jump. The rain slashed down with the lightning.

Big Bill had his horse alongside and an arm around the dude gal as she started tipping from the saddle. It was tough, holding her and subduing her pony at the same time, but Big Bill accomplished it.

She clung to Big Bill until the horses were straightened out. He expected her to be scared, but when he saw her pretty face wet with the rain, she seemed to have an air of impish enjoyment.

"I know a cave up the canyon a-piece," said Big Bill into her ear. "We'd best make for that until the storm blows over."

He'd had this cave in mind all the time. It was off trail and but few rannies knew about it. Big Bill had figured he'd be a heap safer hiding out the kidnaped heiress here, close to the Lazy-Diamond than risk maybe being pursued by a posse over the hills.

Homer Harrington might side him all right about the abduction of his niece, but the hombres of the Shoshones had their own quick ideas, and having the truth come out after he was filled with lead poison wouldn't do Big Bill much good, the way he figured it.

IT WAS as Big Bill swung Elaine Erskine from her paint pony in the dryness of the cave, that his sweet abduction scheme started to go hell west and crooked. She had to slip one arm around Big Bill's shoulders as he set her upon the dry ground of the cave.

She looked up into his eyes, and her red mouth was puckered to kissable humor. Big Bill's teeth clenched, and he made to free his hands and step back.

Big Bill didn't free his hands, and he didn't step back. He hadn't had to force his will too much back in the bunkhouse last night with Mrs. Harrington. But the married dude woman and the dude gal didn't wear the same brand.

Big Bill thought the roaring in his ears was the beating of the storm rain outside the cave. He swore at himself even when he kissed her, and her eyes were bright upon him.

Suddenly he ceased to hear the rain. The girl's eyes were closed, but her tightening arms proved she was still plenty conscious. Big Bill hadn't known any woman's lips could be like that.

Elaine Erskine was in his arms, her eyes opening slowly, looking up at him. Her rain-wet mouth had changed from soft coolness to dry, warm caresses. For the moment all of his purpose for being here faded from Big Bill's mind.

For long minutes, Big Bill forgot he was only a fancy dude cowboy, and that the dude gal was worth more mazuma than any other living person on the Shoshone range.

THE STORM roared into the canyon and out of it. Its passing was followed by a silence broken only by a tumbling, suddenly flooded creek. Elaine looked into Big Bill's eyes, her small hands upon his shoulders.

Big Bill didn't know much about women, but he could have sworn this dude gal was looking through him, clean down to his boots. He made up his mind abruptly that Homer Harrington could have his thousand in dinero, and Elaine Erskine must ride back before he went all the way loco.

He said, "The rain's quit, so we'll be noseyin' back to the trail."

The dude gal gave him a knowing smile. She shook her head.

"Build up a fire, Bill," she said sweetly. "I can't be riding in these soaked slacks. The sun would burn the devil out've me."

"Listen, Elaine," he gulped. "We've got to be gittin' back. I'm confessin' I started out to abduct you this mornin', but I've changed my mind a heap this past few minutes. I ain't no owlhooter, an'—"

She set him back upon his heels then as she smiled and her black eyes sparkled.

"Sure, you're not an outlaw, Bill," she said. "But you've abducted me, and I propose to stay abducted. So build up the fire, and I'll dry out these things before we ride on."

She tossed the slacks aside and

"You're meanin' you knew I was intendin' to kidnap you, an'—"

"That's it, Bill," she murmured. "So you have, and here I am."

"But—Elaine—Miss Erskine—" Big Bill made bad going of steeling himself against her and trying to straighten out his own thoughts.

"You don't savvy it," he went on. "When it's found out we've both vamosed, there'll more'n likely be a posse, an' they'll come shootin'."

"So we'll tell them all about how we

eloped, darling," she murmured. "And when they know I love you an' I came along willingly it will be all right."

In the silence of the canyon that had fallen like a pall with the passing of the quick thunderstorm, the clean, whiplike report of a rifle sounded a short distance outside the cave. Big Bill put the dude gal roughly from his arms.

"Dammit!" he grated. "I tol' yuh; That storm an' holdin' up here's played all hell! We've been followed! Like as not that Roger Larner was trailin' along outside an' seen where we rode into the canyon! Your sayin' you come along of your own free will an' accord won't help none now!"

There was sudden serious thoughtfulness in the dude gal's instant smile.

"No?" she said. "You're wrong, Bill. Because I pinned a note to my pillow, tellin' all of them that you an' I were eloping down to Silver City."

Big Bill had always known that all dudes, male and female, were loco, but this topped everything. He judged the dude gal was doing some fancy lying. So he came out with it.

"That won't wash," he growled. "Seein' I had this idea all on my own, an' you couldn't-a knowed what would happen. So we're high-tailin' for the Lazy-Diamond, if we've still time—"

BIG BILL'S idea of having time exploded abruptly. Two more rifle cracks, then the whooming explosions of a couple of short guns hammered outside their cave, and not far away.

Elaine Erskine stared at Big Bill a few seconds, but made no move. She said, "You're a poor liar, Bill. You didn't have the idea of kidnapin' me all on your own, but maybe so I wish you had. An' if I'm not mistaken, that was Roger Larner who was responsible for the beginning of that shooting, and we must have been seen coming into the cave. But—"

Big Bill's thoughts were so snarled up he couldn't straighten out the crazy new angles of all this. The concrete fact of lead thudding into the floor of the cave, evidently coming from weapons across the canyon, snapped him out of his hazy thinking.

"Git down, an' stay out-a sight!" he cautioned, dragging his .45 and making for the cave mouth. "I'll have to git the drop on them misguided rannies an' talk sense to 'em!"

"No, Bill, no!" the dude gal cried out, rushing across the cave. "You'll be killed! Wait! I've got to tell you! I know more about all this than you think! I know you—"

There was a scrambling sound outside the cave entrance. A tall, lanky figure appeared in full view. Big Bill grated, "Larner!"

The figure was that of Larner. He held a repeating rifle in his hands. The light was dim inside the cave, for Big Bill had not lighted the fire that the dude gal had requested. J. Roger Larner stood there, his Winchester half lifted, apparently peering into the gloomy space and attempting to pick out the figures of the dude gal and Big Bill.

Big Bill pushed the dude gal behind him. He said, "All right, Larner! You've the right to think whatsoever's on your mind! Your gal ain't nowise to blame, seein' I grabbed her an' brung her here by force ——"

"Don't you listen, Roger!" the girl screamed out. "He's lyin', Roger! There's a note on my bed at the ranchhouse that proves I come here of my own free will an' that we were—"

It was Big Bill who suddenly thrust out a hand and stopped the dude gal from talking. Even if he could not see them clearly, Larner had been given the direction of Big Bill's voice, and now that of the girl. His repeating rifle was held ready.

There was no reason that Big Bill could understand why Larner didn't cut loose and have it over with. As for himself, Big Bill could have gunned Larner down easily with a hip shot from his .45, but he could not bring himself to shoot down any hombre who had come honestly and rightfully to protect his girl from a crooked dude rider.

STILL keeping the dude gal quiet, Big Bill walked slowly toward J. Roger Larner, puzzled at the way the dude Easterner was standing there. For Larner hadn't spoken, and he didn't seem to be hearing any better than he was seeing.

And when Big Bill took the second step toward him, Larner moved. His repeating rifle went crashing to the rocky floor of

the cave. J. Roger Larner fell across it, stiffly, and rolled slightly. Big Bill sprang to his side, his hand touching the front of Larner's shirt.

Big Bill said, "Elaine, stay back. There's suthin' danged queer goin' on. Larner come for you, an' there ain't a doubt o' that, but he's been standin' here dyin', maybe so he was dead on his feet for half a minute 'fore he fell. An' he's been shot plumb through the lungs, from in front."

The dude gal cried out, but the sound was suppressed, and when Big Bill looked at her, she was stopping a scream with the back of her hand. Her cry became short, quick words.

"So that was it—Bill, get back—I can see the whole thing now— and we're next — —"

Sure enough, Big Bill probably would have been next, if it hadn't been for the dude gal's instant action. Even as she spoke, all of her soft weight struck him from the side and he fell over, away from the body of J. Roger Larner. The girl's body shielded him as he hit the floor of the cave, and he heard her cry out with pain.

Cursing wildly, Big Bill heaved the girl to one side, rolling to his feet. A sixshooter cracked in the hand of an hombre standing just inside the cave, and Big Bill could see another ranny he did not recognize following the first one in.

He had been hampered by the girl's action, although she had undoubtedly saved his life. But Big Bill threw himself flat as lead scoured one shoulder and snapped two shots at the nearest hombre. The strange ranny went down, but held himself on one knee, lifting his .45 for a clear, steady bead upon Big Bill's body.

At the same instant, Big Bill was compelled to jerk his own .45 upward. For the second hombre's six-shooter was swung away from him, and was centered upon the lovely figure of Elaine Erskine. Even as his .45 roared and his lead ploughed along the gunny's arm from wrist to shoulder, it was in Big Bill's mind that it was more than chance that had aimed the gun at the dude gal.

The bellowing, cursing pilgrim nursing his shattered arm had by his cool steadiness proved that his intent had been to remove Elaine Erskine quickly and permanently from riding the Shoshone range.

But the man who was down got in the shot for which he had steadied his hand. Big Bill felt as if a mule had kicked him in the middle of the stomach. The blow of the heavy bullet doubled him over and his own iron flew from his hand as he went sprawling on his face.

HIS WIND gone, and convinced that his innards had been tee-totally and irreparably ventilated, Big Bill was still able to lift his head. He was confident that he was about to see his final kickoff coming from the powdersmoke of that wounded stranger's gun.

There was a whiplike crack close behind him. The gunman who had stopped Big Bill with that leaden mule kick in the midriff looked surprised. His mouth flopped open. It probably surprised the dying gunny most that he wasn't even able to emit a groan.

A rifle bullet had neatly removed most of his lower jaw as it passed on through into the base of his brain. Big Bill's eyes cocked upon the dude gal, lying flat beside the dead J. Roger Larner. She was resting Larner's dropped Winchester across the body. A wisp of smoke curled from its edge.

Big Bill was amazed to find his breath returning. He felt gingerly along his stomach, where he was sure a slug must have hollowed out a crate in his grub basket. He did not find any wound except a deep dent in the buckle of his gun belt.

In the meantime, the amazing dude gal was on her feet, the repeating rifle pointed at the gunny whose arm Big Bill had shattered. Big Bill's ears almost wagged as Elaine Erskine's red lips seemed to make a song of a few choice epithets.

Then the dude gal was prodding the hombre with the wounded arm.

"So Uncle Homer brought you and this other gun-slinger all the way from Chicago for a neat little job of murder, huh?" she snapped at the groveling figure. "Now you talk, damn you! If you don't start spillin' what your orders were from my dear Uncle Homer, I'll sure as all hell shoot off your ears an' turn you over to some of my dude rider friends. An' you'll find you don't beat any raps on the Shoshone range, even

if all of Uncle Homer's money is back of you!"

The wounded man's tongue licked his thick lips. "Me? Smoke Murphy? Squawk? I ain't talkin', see—"

The repeating rifle cracked. The pilgrim who had proclaimed himself as Smoke Murphy, from Chicago, groaned and clapped a hand to his head. There was only a lot of blood where his left ear had been.

"Wait!" he squealed. "I ain't knowin' nothin' much, but me an' Griffer was sent for! We was to follow that fellow called Larner an' drill him! An' then we was to turn the heat onto you an' this big cow nurse what was paid to run off with you! That's all—"

"And that's enough!" snapped the dude gal. "Now climb onto your shanks and keep goin'! So Uncle Homer had it all figured out, huh? Him an' dear Auntie Harrington, so's he wouldn't have to turn over any of my money to me when it comes due next year!"

BIG BILL was scratching his head. He was beginning to see the light of things as they were. Damn all dudes, including all dude cowboy riders who were dumb enough to play horsey for these Eastern nitwits!

Big Bill said, "So you heered your uncle tell me he'd pay to kidnap you an' keep you out in the hills? I guess you think I'm pretty lowdown, Elaine."

Her black eyes snapped, as she looked at him.

"Maybe so, an' maybe not," she said quietly. "An' maybe I've changed my mind since—since—"

"Maybe so you'd best put them pajamas on, an' we can talk more comfortable like," offered Big Bill. "I see what happened, an' your Uncle Homer was framing everything from the beginning. Glory! Your own aunt must-a been in on it, an' she run out-a the bunkhouse last night so's your uncle could make Larner believe it was you, an' then he sent Larner after me so's we'd mix it up an' it—"

"And it would look like Roger Larner followed you today, and you had a gunfight, an' both of you would be killed. It would look also like my Uncle Homer's little niece Elaine got herself in the way of a bullet. So all three of us would be dead, and everybody would be satisfied, but mostly Uncle Homer and my sweet Auntie Harrington with all of my fortune to spread around next year."

Big Bill shook his head. He was still somewhat fuddled. Only the devil himself could give these dudes such devious ideas. He heard the clinking of horses' shod feet outside in the canyon.

"I'm bettin'," he said, "that's the Lazy-Diamond riders comin' along with your uncle to see what the shooting was all about. Reckon I'll have to give him back that thousan' an tell 'im—"

Riders already were climbing toward the cave. The dude gal was beside Big Bill, and she pulled his arms around her. His face and neck felt like a redhot sunset, seeing that the dude gal's slacks were still lying on the floor of the cave.

"You'll be keeping that thousand, Bill," she said softly. "My uncle won't be having any use for it where he's going. An' won't he be surprised to see how we have everything all worked out."

Big Bill Danvers looked at the bodies on the floor of the cave. He tightened his arms around the slim, lovely figure of the gal known as Elaine Erskine.

"You're dang tootin' your uncle'll be surprised, an' so will all the other hombres on the Lazy-Diamond," said Big Bill. "I'm goin' back punchin' honest cows, an' the devil take all dudes!"

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KILLERS RIDE FAST

(*Continued from page* 25)

Her scream was shrill. *"Look out!"*

The girl sidestepped. Judd Blore whirled, his face dark with fury. No longer was he the genial cattleman; There was something in his eyes that chilled Jerry's blood, caused her heart to stand still. She was blinded as his gun streaked flame.

A bullet whined past her ear. She dropped to her knees, weak with fright as Judd Blore lowered his gun. . .

Two flashes from beyond the porch! Two bullets striking with muffled impacts!

Blore's body jerked convulsively as if he had been delivered two staggering blows by an invisible fist. He grunted, and then his legs sagged grotesquely. Tightening muscles as he fell squeezed the trigger of his .45. Lead ploughed a furrow of splinters along the side of the door frame.

Black specks danced before Jerry's eyes. The floor came up and struck her. . . .

JERRY gained consciousness to find herself in Brett Lewis' arms. He was gently bathing her face with a damp towel, his face anxious.

"Are you all right, Jerry?" he asked.

She smiled faintly, nodded her bright head, and closed her eyes. How good it felt to be in his strong arms after that long strain!

"You sure saved my life by screamin' when you did, Jerry," he said gratefully. "When I saw the flash of Blore's gun, I knew where to shoot."

She gripped his hand. "Is—is he dead?"

He nodded his curly black head. "Funny," he said, grin wrinkles crinkling at the corners of his eyes. "I could faintly hear a calf bawling. But I never heerd no calf bawl so loud or so long. I figgered Shorty must be needin' me, so I burned the breeze gettin' here. But it was a real calf doin' all that bawling. The joke's on Shorty."

"No," she laughed, shakily, "the joke's on you. I separated that calf from its mother for a purpose. I knew the signal you and Shorty had agreed on. I hoped you'd hear it. Now you better let it go to its mother."

"Something else comes first," he smiled.

WHEN the sheriff and a posse which included Todd Garth, her father, came some time later, however, Jerry found that Rawhide Tanner knew almost as much about the murder as she did.

"Reckon I owe you a' apology, Lewis," the sheriff said. "That polecat, Starkey, come to Lisandro with his rotten proposition. Lisandro pretended to agree, but instead of going for his horse, he came to my office. He's not the kind of an hombre to go in for nothin' like that.

"I went over to the hotel, caught Starkey, and he was so nervous that it wasn't no time till he was babblin' everything he knowed, includin' how he and Blore had killed Redfield. But he claims Blore did the actual shootin' which is probable."

Out of the crowd stepped a homely, but

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well-dressed and troubled-looking Mexican. Jerry recognized Miguel Lisandro.

"I loff the beautiful senoritas," he said. "But Miguel Lisandro is not a snake who would take a *senorita* against her weel. No! *Que blastema!* what do thees *Senor* Starkey and *Senor* Blore theenk I am. Miguel Lisandro is no common *bandido*. My most humble apology I weesh you weel accept heem, *senorita.*"

Touched by the homely little man's evident sincerity, Jerry extended her hand. She realized that in one particular Blore was right—Miguel Lisando was good-hearted. He shook her hand, brightening.

"There's nothing to forgive," she said. "And I want you to know how grateful Brett and I are to you for acting as you did. I hope you will come to our wedding."

Miguel Lisandro's homely face was almost handsome as it was lighted by a dazzling smile. He waved his arms excitedly as Brett slipped his arm around Jerry's shoulders, and smiled into her happy eeys.

"Ah!" he sighed. "Loff! No wan can loff Miguel Lisandro, but he weel breeng the best damn' present for your wedding that he can buy in the whole of Mexico!"

GUNSORE RANNY

(*Continued from page* 41)

weevil-riddled beans the Agent gave them. Last season's yearlings would begin putting on weight.

That night, they ate freshly killed beef. Ab said, "This here is clean meat, I finished the critter about three winks afore she died."

It was tough, stringy, but at least, it was not sow-belly.

AB and Jeff were jubilant. "Reckon we oughta do a bit of ploughing. Plant a little suthin and store it up for the next bad weather, costs too much buying hay and toting it way out here."

Emily caught Warren's eye as they sat down on the newly made benches that were pulled up to the packing-case table. She squeezed his hand, and he whispered, "We'll be leaving soon, honey."

She sighed, shook her head, and Warren was puzzled.

That night, as he lay on his heap of straw, Warren listened to the snoring of the two brothers. He could not sleep. He was too tired, and he was strangely stirred by the rising vitality of the air and the soil, he could feel the grass growing. More than that, there was a wonder growing up in his mind.

Two crackbrains, two eccentric galoots from nowhere had survived a "leveler." Jeff had had no business living with a .30-30 drilling his lungs, but here he was. Ab should have ended up by crawling on all fours, snarling like a wolf, out in this desolation where he had found what he called a rich land; he should have starved or should have been eaten, but here he was! The God of fools had used him, Bart Warren, cattle baron, to make two skillet-heads prosper, as they called it.

He lay there, dozing thinking he was awake yet not realizing he was more than half asleep until a shrill cry made him bound upright. Emily was lifting the brush roof with her scream. Warren bounded through the darkness, crashed against the sod wall, and nearly collapsed.

He no longer heard Ab and Jeff snoring. The red whirl in his head spread all through him and became a blaze of rage. He dashed out, toward Emily's sod hut. "They're feeling spry, huh? The crazy—"

A dozen bounds, and he saw a blur against the darkness of the shelter's door. A woman's figure. She stood there, and when he stopped, panting, she caught him with both arms.

"Wh-h-hat—where are they—what happened?"

"Oh, Bart—darling—why, nothing, I just had a nightmare, I guess," she answered, drawing back into the black pocket. "Watch out, you'll hit your head."

Warren was so relieved that he began shaking from head to foot. He had expected to find the wild-eyed brothers. He stumbled to his knees, and Emily sank with him, still clinging to him. "Bart, you're all shaky, what's the matter? I'm sorry I startled you."

Then he began kissing her. He started to explain, and then decided that that was

a waste of breath. So did Emily. . . .

Finally, she laughed softly, and went back to something they had both forgotten. "I can almost guess what you thought, when I screamed." Before he could answer, she rumpled his hair and went on, "You idiot, why do you think I had you build this hut?"

It all seemed simple enough now, and Warren wondered why he had ever believed Emily was really afraid of the two brothers. . . .

THEN came the round-up of what beef looked hearty enough to stand the drive to Ingersoll Gulch. The horses had gained a little. Two would draw the wagon, one would be the *remuda*, one would be saddled for the driver. Once Warren explained the principles of driving a herd, Ab and Jeff reckoned they could take their turns.

Warren spent his off shifts riding with Emily, who drove the team. There was a contented gleam in her eye, a look he had never seen before. This made him wonder, and another thing was the peculiar, secretive little smile she wore whenever she regarded the shaggy cattle. He did not ask her to explain until they were within a day of Ingersoll Gulch. She answered, "I've seen these simple brothers survive against all rhyme and reason. But I am still wondering who will buy cattle like that?"

Warren chuckled. "So have I. Here are two guesses. The Indian agent will buy them very reasonably, and will have Jeff and Ab sign a voucher for prime beef, which the boys will do, for all their scruples. Between the two of them they can't spell cat. The other guess is, the stage depot restaurant will do the same thing, passengers don't stay long enough to kick about the grub. Everyone will make money. Even Ab and Jeff, a little."

The way it turned out was that the Indian Agent did buy the beef. Ab paid off a note that some fool of a banker had made. He bought grub for a year to come. He bought another saddle, four cow ponies, a kerosene lamp, and a few odds and ends. But no seed for sowing. He said to Warren and Emily, "I done learned how to be a cattle man, and when you know how, you are a plumb fool for ploughing."

"Where's Jeff?" Emily wondered.

Ab looked embarrassed. "He's backsliding. He's so low-down drunk, I'd disown him, exceptin' he's my brother." He was anxious to change the subject. "What are you-all aiming to do?"

Emily said: "Bart and I are turning around and going back to the country we quit. We've learned a lot about the cattle business from you."

Warren waited until Ab went out of the hotel to find his back-sliding brother. Then he glanced about the lobby, and demanded, "What in hell do you mean? That you'll really go back with me?"

"Why, of course, I will. After seeing Ab and Jeff—"

"The way to start being a cattle baron!" He laughed and risked kissing her and be damned to the crowd. "I forgot a thousand dollars in Aztec Hill—more than Ab and Jeff ever heard of. You and I tried to take the country over by buying it instead of building it. Simple, isn't it?"

"Bart," she whispered, "I'm so happy to hear you say that. I've been hoping you'd think that way, ever since that night I had a nightmare."

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THAT SALT CREEK KID

(*Continued from page* 51)

Cougar, made a fatal mistake. He moved his shaggy head, his pale eyes looking toward the Salt Creek Kid.

THe Salt Creek Kid took no chance on using the gun that Greeley had given her. She reined her cayuse forward, rearing the beast, and turning Greeley sick inside as the iron-shod forefeet descended. It was only when Jane Reilly rolled free and The Cougar lay there, his head a bloody mess, that Greeley knew again what was happening.

A string of oaths rolled out in a woman's voice.

"So, you damn' sidewinder! When I'm gone, you'd go after the first woman you see!"

It was the screaming voice of the Salt Creek Kid. She cursed again.

"An' you, John Huber, you make up to me in jail, an' you're the one who murdered, Bart Bim, of the *Boomerang,* an' expect to get away with it by havin' me strung up—"

The Cougar rolled over and lay still. Greeley was looking at the twisted face of Curt Saunders. He heard Sheriff Huber shout, and saw his gun turned toward the Salt Creek Kid.

"Damn you!" yelled Huber. "You talk too much! Even if I did gun Bart Bim, it was Saunders who paid—"

From somewhere Greeley gathered the strength to lay his short gun over his knee. Just as Sheriff Huber's .45 blasted at the Kid, powder burned the cloth of Greeley's levis. The sheriff was still shooting as he lay down, but he was never to get up again.

"Thanks, pilgrim!" snapped the Salt Creek Kid.

A HORSE and rider charged down the hill. "A little late, Greeley, but I heered the shootin'!" came the voice of young Tom Colton.

The Salt Creek Kid was turning her horse. Colton drove toward her.

"Let 'er go, Colton!" said Greeley. "She's earned a chance!"

Jane Reilly stared at Greeley curiously. "Saunders and Huber said the *Boomerang* had helped swing the election," she said. "They claim the newspaper will tell the county that Tom Colton helped the Salt Creek Kid escape, and now it'll look as if both of you aided her."

Tom Colton's eyes were wide as Greeley told him that the Salt Creek Kid was a girl, a gun girl, and that was why Sheriff Huber kept the Kid hidden. He knew that the capture of a woman would bring a big laugh instead of the support of the voters.

Colton said, "I heard of what they made you do, Greeley. By this time your paper is all over the county and the election will be over before we can get back to town. Then they'll put Deputy Jim Bunt Huber's place, seein' he's gone to boothill."

"And," said Colton accusingly, "you yourself let the Salt Creek Kid ride away, and that'll help out the story that everybody's reading this time."

Greeley grinned at Jane Reilly and at Tom Colton.

"Wrong," he said. "There was only one copy of that paper saying Tom Colton helped the Salt Creek Kid escape, and I saw to it that Curt Saunders got it. That's why he was out here. The other *Boomerangs* that tell the truth are already all over the county."

"But you must-a broke the Salt Creek Kid out-a jail, Greeley," said Tom Colton, scratching his head. "An' then you turned the Kid loose."

Jane's warm, brown eyes were turned up to Greeley. There was a question in them.

"Tell you, Colton," said Greeley steadily. "The Kid sided me an' shot Saunders, The Cougar, an' there might be complications if we took the Kid back to Big Basin a prisoner."

"So the Salt Creek Kid is a girl and you broke her out of jail, Greeley?" Jane said softly. "I think you showed sense. The way she looked at you just as she rode off, you're right. There might have been complications."

Tom Colton shook his head. "I don't get it," he said.

"Maybe some day you'll round up the Salt Creek Kid again, Tom," said Greeley. "Then you will."

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Rough-Playin' Hombre

(*Continued from page* 61)

Crass grabbed her, gripped the back of her neck in one enormous hand and held her half paralyzed and helpless.

"Ahhh!" Crass croaked, feasting his eyes on her.

"No!" Betts screamed and tried to run past Crass again. She ducked under his arm and dashed out of the shelter. Crass lunged, sent her spinning to the ground,

CRASS stiffened, jerked his head around. He froze momentarily. Face bleak and colorless, mouth a mean, thin gash, Joe Lace stood to one side and behind the shelter, a cocked six-shooter in his hand. Outdistanced since they'd left their horses back up the slope, Egg still clawed through the brush yards away.

"Arpp," Crass croaked. "It's that damned—Lace!"

"Drop that gun, huddem you!" Lace heard Arpp snarl from inside the shelter. "I got my cutter lined on this woman an' I'll give her lead if you don't!"

"Lace!" Elspeth screamed. "Don't make him shoot me! Lace!"

Lace ground his teeth, cursing himself for a fool. He lowered the hammer of his six-gun and tossed it. It landed close to Crass.

"That damn' bald partner of yours around?" Crass demanded. "If he is, he best show himself an' not try no tricks. Y'see, it'll be like this if he does."

Crass pulled Betts around before him and drew his gun. Lace shuttled his eyes toward the undergrowth the other side of the shelter. He glimpsed Egg crawling toward the open front of the hut.

"Egg ain't caught up with me yet," Lace lied, his voice quavery.

Crass motioned with his pistol over Bett's shoulder. "Come on, you snoopin' son," he rasped. "You're goin' to get a dose of what you give them other two after we stuck up that bank. Come on up an' say a prayer. An' you better bawl 'er out to Smith to stay back or come up easy. We got to hightail now, nohow. It's a cinch Farn's give up head, damn him."

Hands held shoulder high, Lace came

down past the shelter. He looked sideways. Elspeth cowered in a corner. Gun in hand, but not pointing directly at her, Arpp pulled his lips wolfishly at Lace.

Lace stopped. His six-gun lay not two yards away, where he had tossed it. He flicked a glance down at it, looked at Bett's drawn, stricken little face. She noted the look he put groundward.

"It's a good idea," Crass boomed, still holding Betts between himself and Lace. He turned a bit now, better to talk to Arpp inside the shelter. Lace tensed, cast a prayerful look toward the growth beyond the shelter. . . .

Betts jerked her feet off the ground and pulled down on Crass's arm as Joe Lace fell to the ground, clawing at his gun!

Crass's gun roared, the slug slamming into the ground beyond Lace. Lace felt the comforting grip of his gun's butt in his hand as he rolled. Arpp's gun rocketed and Lace heard the vicious hum of the bullet close to his head, heard it slash the brush. He thrust himself up on his left elbow. Crass gripped Betts to him, using her as a shield.

LACE'S gun thundered, his thumb working the single-action's hammer as swiftly as Crass could trigger his double-action gun. A spurt of smoke stabbed from the Colt's muzzle, lancing not at Crass, but at Nig Arpp. Arpp rocked back, slammed into Elspeth and knocked her to the ground. Her shrill, terrified scream sounded above the pound of guns.

Another gun, another .old single-action .45, tuned into the hell's medley. Big Crass jerked around, the left side of his face ripped open, suddenly curtained red. Betts lunged away from him. Crass steadied, slammed a slug that clipped Egg Smith's jacket. Egg's gun roared again. Crass spun completely around, swayed, dropped his gun and coughed as he pressed his big hands to his chest. He coughed again, his knees buckled and his face rooted into the ground. But, being dead, Crass didn't care.

There was a sudden, odd silence. Arpp's wet, choked voice blotted that. He raised his gun as he took a step backward and then flung himself down, reaching for Elspeth as he had another shot at Lace. Where the bullet went, Lace didn't know.

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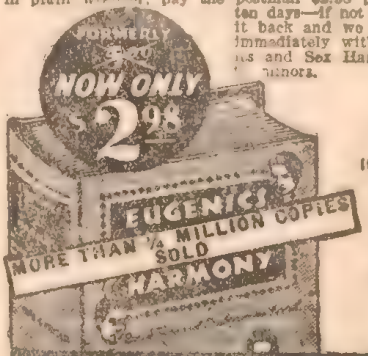

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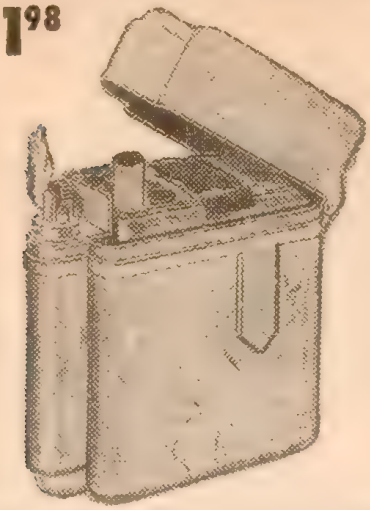

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He knew where his own shot struck . . . but Nig Arpp never did. . . A small blue hole appeared over his right eye. . . .

Lace straightened, released a loud, pent breath, passed his hand across his eyes.

Elspeth came running out of the shelter. She flung her arms around his neck, kissing him hysterically. Lace looked over at Betts. She turned toward the shelter.

"Just a minute," Lace said. "We're leaving Nig an' Big up here for the sheriff to see." He approached Betts and looked down at her. All the sickness of gunfight and bloodshed was driven out of him at the sight of her. She straightened, facing him squarely.

"But Lace," Elspeth protested. "You saved me and . . . "

"Keep the change," Lace cut her off, not looking around.

"I'll have Sam Taylor fire you," she flared.

"You can't. We don't work for him. We're goin' to stock our ranch again. An' to hell with dudes. All but one an' she's not exactly a dude."

TO OUR READERS

Beginning with the March issue, the price of FIGHTING WESTERN was increased to 20c per copy. This new price has been made necessary by steadily increasing costs of publishing the magazine during recent years. In 1942 the paper on which this magazine is printed cost $66.00 a ton; today the price is $113.00 a ton. During this period pay-roll and other expenses have advanced in similar proportion. Many other magazines raised their prices months ago; the same reasons which forced them to this action have caused us reluctantly to follow suit. The only alternative would have been to reduce the quality of the magazine.

We believe that readers will recognize that this long-postponed action assures the continuation of the most skilled craftsmanship and the highest quality in the publication of FIGHTING WESTERN.

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OUTLAW HORSE

(*Continued from page 73*)

the act of turning, Harmon staggered back, hit the ground. With a strangled cry, Olga ran toward him, just as the hawk-faced Bullard swung from his saddle. Seeing the girl, he hesitated for a second; then, with an oath, turned again to the prostrate cowboy, his still smoking gun lifted.

Olga flung herself at him screaming, "Stop! Stop—you murderer!"

Harmon, still flat on the ground and with a crimson stain spreading over his shoulder, mumbled, "Go 'way, honey. Let me—shoot it out—"

DRAGGING at Bullard's gunarm, Olga sobbed, "He's hurt. You can't—" Her husky voice steadied, blue eyes going strangely dark. "If you want me, Tug Bullard, put that wounded man on his horse. Let him ride—and I'll marry you whenever you say."

His narrowed gaze bored through her. Then, "Good enough," he said, holstering his weapon. "We'll go back to town, and I'll get a parson—"

"You'll fight first!" In that brief second, Harmon had come to his feet, swaying, but with the haziness gone from his eyes. His right arm hung limp, but the leveled .44 in his left hand was steady, as he rasped, "For the first time in your life, you rat, you're going to shoot it out with a man, fair and square!"

Knowing that her slightest move might mean death for the man she loved, Olga stood statue-still. But the blood in her veins seemed to congeal, as she saw him holster his gun. Then his words came, hard, clipped:

"Draw when you're ready!"

There was a moment of strained watchfulness. Then Bullard's hand flashed in a quick draw. But Harmon's left hand was too swift for the eye to follow, as he drew and fired from the hip. Two shots echoed through the rocky gorge like sullen thunder. Tug Bullard's was a split second too late. . . .

The Boss of Sagishaw County lay on the ground, fumbling feebly at his vest. "Take papers—out'a my—pocket," he

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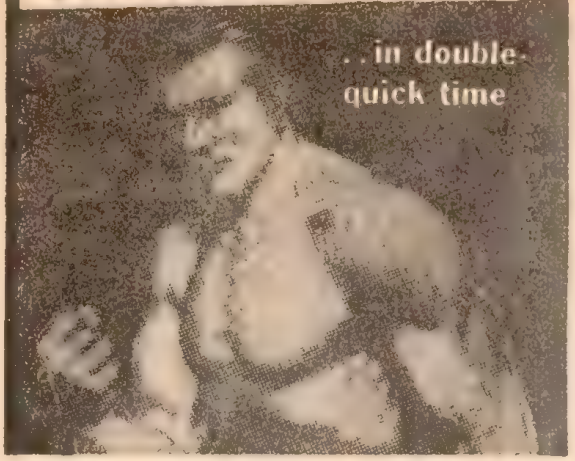

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choked out. And when the grim-faced cowboy had complied; "Burn 'em—understand? Wedding present—" His voice trailed off.

Harmon drew the white-faced girl behind the mill, then glanced at the papers in his hand. "Why, this—it's my mortgage!" he exclaimed shakily. Dark eyes somber, he added slowly, "When Bullard was alive, he used a stacked deck to get my ranch; dead he gives it back to me. was a crooked fighter, but—a good loser. Well, I'll ride in to the sheriff now—"

"Let me bandage your arm first!" Olga cried. "Then I'll go with you. You need me as a witness."

"I need you—always!" he burst out. "From the first minute I saw you—when I kissed you that first night, I loved you."

With a little cry, she went into his one good arm felt herself crushed against his bloodstained shirt. "I had no right to tell you before, sweetheart," he went on. "With my ranch about gone, with a good chance of being wiped out any day, there was nothing left but to keep on fighting."

Olga still clung to him. But she felt a sinking sensation of defeat. Life with Dan would go on like this, punctuated by bullets and sudden death. . . .

With his lips against her red-gold hair, he whispered unsteadily, "It seems too good to be true, honey: Peace at last—and you to work for! I'm just an ordinary hombre and not half good enough for you. But I'll try so hard to make you happy!"

And suddenly she knew that he wasn't a two-gun man at heart; that where some men would have whined or run away he had faced ruin and death with a reckless challenge.

"I think you're wonderful!" she carolled. "The best and bravest—"

His mouth closed down on her soft lips, drowning the words in kisses.

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STANFORD AND THE HORSE EXPERTS

by GORDON DOZIER

LELAND STANFORD, the New York lawyer who came to California in 1852, made a fortune as a storekeeper and grubstaker for miners, became governor and U. S. Senator, built the Central Pacific railroad, and, as a memorial to his son, established Stanford University with an endowment of $20,000,000—at one point turned part of his titanic energies to the breeding of horses. Os in many other matters, he thought he knew more about the subject than the experts. As usual, he was right.

The belief was firmly held by the best authorities that fast trotters came about through accident rather han blood lines. Stanford played a large part in upsetting this wrong notion by purchasing Electioneer, a celebrated trotter, and breeding him to sire a long line of first-rate progeny.

While in Paris, he saw a famous painting by Meissonier called "The Cavalry Charge," a tremendously spirited canvas filled, naturally, with horses in action. Stanford told the painter that the movements in which the animals were caught were unnatural. His arguments so convinced the at first indignant Meissonier that the artist finally declared that he'd never again attempt to paint a horse.

Stanford held the then-radical belief that in trotting at high speed, a horse sometimes has all four feet off the ground. To prove his point, he invested $200,000 in a set of electrically operated cameras to take a series of pictures split seconds apart of a horse trotting. These were later published in a book called *The Horse in Motion* —which gave considerable impetus to the development of movies.

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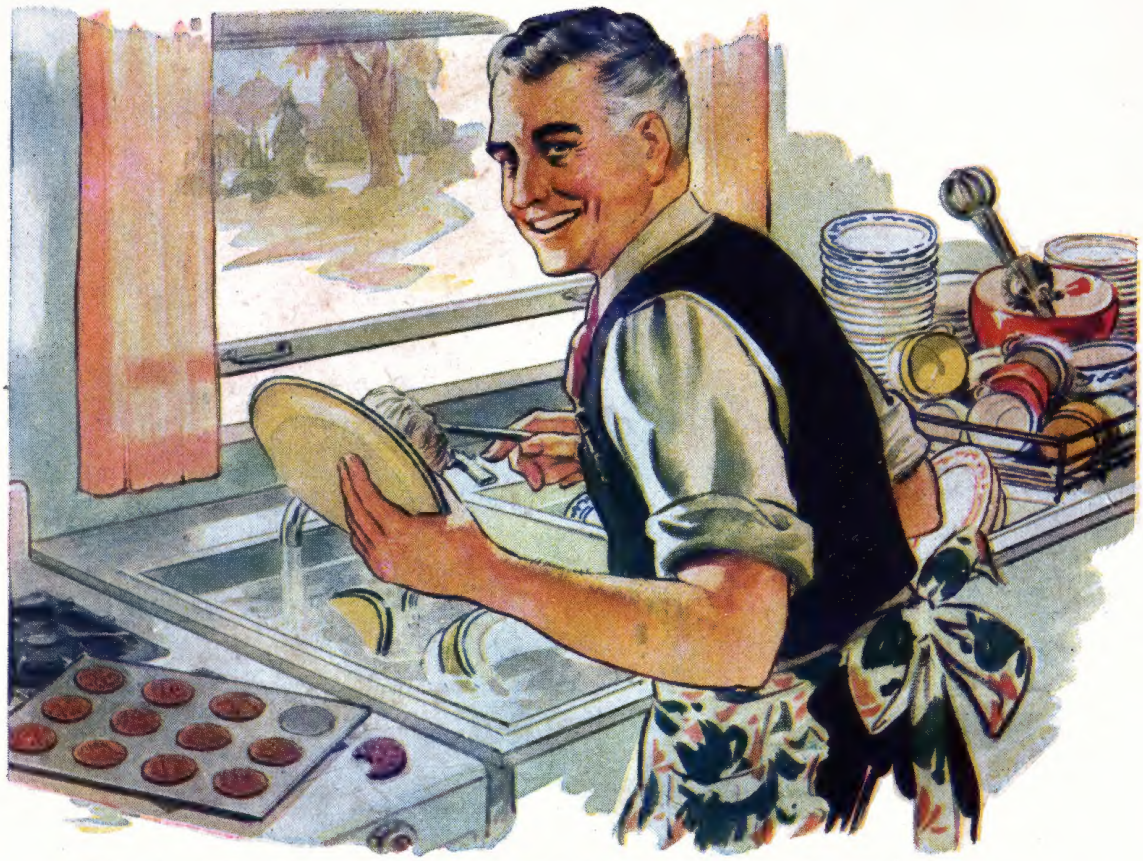

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